WALKER EVANS IN NEW YORK:
PHOTOGRAPHY AND URBAN CULTURE, 1927–1934

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WALKER EVANS IN NEW YORK:
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This dissertation offers the first systematic study of the photographs taken by Walker Evans in New York City and its vicinity between 1927 and 1934, a formative period that preceded the full consecration of his work in the second half of the 1930s.

About 200 urban photographs in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum and a significant body of negatives in the Metropolitan Museum's Walker Evans Archive indicate that Evans's early work was mostly devoted to the theme of the modern metropolis. Cross-referencing Evans's images with contemporary photographs, aerial views, architectural plans, insurance maps, drawings, and verbal descriptions, this study aims to identify the exact subjects, the places, and whenever possible the dates of this previously uncharted body of urban photographs. The resulting catalog of over 300 images suggests the contours of an unfinished project on New York City that Evans developed in the years immediately preceding and following the Wall Street crash of 1929.

On a different level, this dissertation addresses the question of Evans's visual education in the context of the "transatlantic modernism" of the 1920s and '30s. In particular, it shows that Evans, despite his early literary ambitions, was fully conversant with the work of visual artists, architects, and critics of the Machine Age. Long ignored and often discredited as mere experiments in the fashionable style of the New Vision, his early photographs incorporated and developed the critique of American modernism offered by such books as Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923) and Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika. Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (1926). At the same time, his New York project shared the quest for an American art widely debated in avant-garde magazines and was consonant with the work of many painters later known as Precisionist.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Antonello Frongia graduated in City and Regional Planning from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in 1998 with a thesis on Jacob A. Riis. Since 2002 has been teaching and researching the history of photography at various Italian universities. Since 2010 he is an assistant professor in the history of modern art at the Università Roma Tre, Italy.

He is a steering committee member of the Italian Society for the Study of Photography (SISF).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

VOLUME I

Biographical sketch iii
Acknowledgments iv
Abbreviations ix

Introduction 1

Chapter one
An unfinished project on New York City
1.1 Manhattan skyline 6
1.2 An unfinished project 9
1.3 Historiographical issues 18
1.4 In the archive 44

Chapter two
Photographing New York City at the turn of the 1920s
2.1 New York City, May 1927 55
2.2 Urban illustrations 62
2.3 Evans's circle 78

Chapter three
Icons of modernity, I: Skyscrapers
3.1 From the office building 98
3.2 Skyscraper city: the view from below 130
3.3 Urban relics 169

Chapter four

Icons of modernity, II: Industrial subjects

4.1 Factory buildings and grain elevators 183

4.2 Port of New York 214

4.3 Precisionism 230

Chapter five

The writing on the wall: Words, signs, and screens of the metropolis

5.1 Surface and mass 242

5.2 Advertising and visual culture in New York 247

5.3 Visualizing the urban text 266

5.4 Coda: looking into a mirror 298

Conclusions 302

Reference materials 310

VOLUME II

Appendix

A catalog of Walker Evans's New York City photographs, 1927–1934

ABBREVIATIONS

AAM	Akron Art Museum
ACMAA	Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth
AIC	The Art Institute of Chicago
BANC	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
BM	Brooklyn Museum
BML	The British Museum, London
CCA	Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal
CCP	Center for Creative Photography, Tucson
CMA	The Cleveland Museum of Art
CMAO	Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio
FWAM/UM	Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
GEH	George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester
HAM/FM	Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum
JMA/CU	Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca
JPGM	The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
LBC	LaSalle Bank Photography Collection, LaSalle Bank and ABN AMRO, Chicago
LoC	Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
MFA	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
MIA	The Minneapolis Institute of Arts
MoCP	Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago

MoMA	The Museum of Modern Art, New York
NAMA	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City
NGA	National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
NGC	National Gallery of Canada
NM	Newark Museum
NMA	Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida
NOMA	The New Orleans Museum of Art
NYDR	New York City Department of Records
NYPL	Photographic views of New York City, 1870's-1970's, The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy
NYTM	New York Transit Museum
PMA	Philadelphia Museum of Art
SAAM	Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
SFFAM	Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
SFMoMA	San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
SMA/UK	Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas
TATE	Tate and National Galleries of Scotland
TFAA	Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection
UMMA	University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor
WAM	Wichita Art Museum
WAMAH	Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford
WC	Wellesley College
WEA	Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
WMAA	Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation offers the first systematic study of the photographs taken by Walker Evans in New York City and its vicinity between 1927 and 1934, a formative period that preceded the full consecration of his work in the second half of the 1930s.

Despite the flurry of literature on Evans's oeuvre, especially following the retrospective exhibition organized by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971, studies about his beginnings as a photographer remain relatively scarce. Centering their attention on Evans's portrayal of Depression America and his collaboration with the photographic agency of the Farm Security Administration in 1935–1936, historians have traditionally interpreted his first urban photographs as an exercise in formal abstraction in the fashionable vocabulary of European modernism. Evans's early experiments, it has been argued, were alien to the subjects and the style that characterized his mature achievements: the plain, frontal record of Middletown America and of its vernacular architecture that formed the basis of *American Photographs*, his 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Evans's initial aspiration to become a writer and his steadfast refusal to discuss his education as a visual artist have also contributed to the general understimation of his early work.

About 200 urban photographs in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, the fundamental body of negatives and documents of the Walker Evans Archive made available by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a significant amount of prints held in various repositories suggest that Evans's interest in the theme of the metropolis was far from superficial. A preliminary issue addressed by this study concerns the level of awareness and coherence of these materials. To answer this question, the first phase of my research has entailed the identification of the exact subjects, the places, and

– whenever possible – the dates of this previously uncharted body of photographs. Cross-referencing Evans's images with other photographs, aerial views, architectural plans, insurance maps, drawings, and verbal descriptions, I have created a catalog of over 300 previously miscaptioned and often unidentified urban photographs. What clearly emerges from this survey is a selective visual geography of New York City. Evans shunned the most obvious iconography celebrating the tall building as the creation of a specific architect or as a technological feat of modernism. On the contrary, he focused his urban explorations on the Financial District, South Street, 14th Street and Union Square, 42nd Street and the Grand Central Area, Central Park South, Brooklyn, Coney Island, and Gowanus – all areas that were undergoing dramatic change as a consequence of the real estate boom, or that represented the *genius loci* of traditional New York.

A second level of analysis is aimed at detecting the specific modalities of Evans's visualization of New York City. By comparing Evans's portrayal of specific buildings and places with alternative images of the same subjects, it has been possible to deconstruct the artist's visual strategies and his reinterpretation of existing representational models. Evans developed an ironic, paradoxical visual language, equally based on witty observation of significant urban details and on the decontextualization of recognizable buildings, often photographed from the back or during construction.

Far from a pure formal exercise, Evans's abstractions turn out to be the result of a performative act that generates a conceptual tension between the formal qualities of the photograph, the geometric nature of the modernist metropolis, and the viewer's everyday experience of his or her environment. And while this research shows that Evans was conversant with the artistic debate that fueled the "transatlantic modernism" of the 1920s (especially with painters later identified as "Precisionist"), his understanding of the modern city appears to be significantly indebted to such books as Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923), Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika. Bilderbuch eines Architecten* (1926), László Moholy-Nagy's *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929), as well as to the current debate developed in art and architectural magazines of the time.

Photographing such skyscrapers as the 120 Wall Street Building, the ITT Building, the 10 East 40th Street Building (significantly avoiding the Rockefeller Center and the Empire State Building), Evans tried to convey the general experience of city life in a period of rapid change, while at the same time addressing the relationship between structure and form, the sculptural nature of architecture, its relationship with the urban fabric, and the symbolic value of height and monumentality in a corporate and capitalist society. By photographing the skyscraper during construction or from the rear, however, Evans concealed its identity and addressed the "unconscious" aspects of modern design. This is a main point of distinction between Evans's approach to New York and several photographic projects developed in book form at the time, such as Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*. Relatively uninterested in a traditional survey of New York's main buildings, he aimed to construct a metaphorical image of the new metropolis based on documentary fragments of its constituent parts, suspended between reality and fiction.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. Chapter One, "An unfinished project on New York City," opens with the analysis of a group of photographs in the Walker Evans Archive that turn out to be the earliest surviving examples of Evans's interest in the urbanscape of New York City. Taken systematically over several weeks in the fall of 1928, these images are an implicit statement of Evans's intentions and suggest the inception of a specific project on the modern city. The chapter discusses the methodological issues raised by considering the photographic archive as a text to be deciphered, Evans's protracted fascination with cities, and the reasons behind the historiographical resistance toward his early work.

Chapter Two, "Photographing New York City at the turn of the 1920s", sets the background of Evans's urban photographs in the decade preceding the Wall Street crash. Relevant aspects of New York's visual culture are reconstructed with the aim of understanding the context of Evans's work. City images made by artists, commercial photographers, and illustrators are discussed as part of a larger network of representations

that Evans absorbed through a great variety of books, magazines, and exhibitions that flourished in the expanding culture of 1920s New York. Further information about Evans's visual education is gathered from the circle of artists, photographers, and architects with whom he probably discussed the issues raised by his urban explorations.

The dominant theme of Evans's early work is the subject of Chapter Three, "Icons of modernity, I: Skyscrapers." The scattered photographs of the Walker Evans Archive are presented in a thematic order, moving from city views taken from the top of tall buildings to street level explorations of the urban scene, ending with a discussion of Evans's concern for the constituent materials of the city. His visual strategies, entailing the choice of particular buildings as well as specific techniques of image-making, suggest an ambitious program that I propose to see as a performative meditation on the individual's place in the chaos of the metropolis.

Chapter Four, "Icons of modernity, II: Industrial subjects," addresses another major aspect that attracted Evans's attention. Smokestacks, power plants, grain elevators, but also the products of modern technology discussed in architectural circles, such as steamships, formed an iconography that Evans partly shared with international artists of the time. Distancing himself from the relative optimism of the New Vision and from the American enthusiasts of the Machine Age, however, Evans seemed closer in spirit to certain strains of contemporary painting, later identified as Precisionists. A parallel with the issues raised by the work of Charles Demuth concludes the chapter, suggesting Evans's ability to draw inspiration from a variety of cultural sources beyond literature and photography.

The layered semiotics of New York are the theme of chapter five, "The writing on the wall: words, signs, and screens of the metropolis." Evans repeatedly photographed the manifestations of the commercial city, recording words and images carried by painted signs, billboards, film posters, neon lights, and theatre marquees, as well as shop windows and Surrealistic mannequins. Seen in the context of Evans's skyscraper and industrial photographs, these images seem to address the dialectical relationship

between mass and surface that Le Corbusier discussed as the "modern optics" of the city. But these photographs of urban signage, in which Evans often deconstructed the communication of consumerist culture, suggest as well that he was conversant with the "revolution of the word" proclaimed by Eugène Jolas in 1929 and enacted by American poets such as e. e. cummings.

In the Conclusions, I present a brief summary of the results of this study and I discuss the importance of Evans's case for a larger understanding of urban photography as a civil practice.

The Appendix includes a systematic catalog of New York City prints and negatives made by Walker Evans between 1927 and 1934, as well as comparative illustrations of contemporary buildings, photographs, and artworks discussed in the main text.

CHAPTER ONE
AN UNFINISHED PROJECT ON NEW YORK CITY

1.1 Manhattan skyline

A group of nine negatives in the Walker Evans Archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and three corresponding prints in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum depict the jazzy skyline of Lower Manhattan from the perspective of a casual observer strolling on the Brooklyn Bridge at the end of the 1920 (figs. 9–23). All variants of the same view, these snapshots show a chaotic accumulation of buildings of various ages, from five-story warehouses on South Street to the tall constructions towering in the background, intermingled with setback skyscrapers, urban landmarks, industrial smokestacks, rooftoop tanks, billboards, cables, and trusses.

Apparently detached and diagrammatic, almost postcard-like in their style, these photographs appear to be less a topographic document than a meditation on the city's symbolic geography. In Evans's image of New York, foreground and background collapse into a stenographic representation that is as contrived as it is plausible. By eschewing the picturesque surface of the water, these views contradict the canonical image of Manhattan as a natural peninsula gracefully protruding above the busy streams of the East River. Subversively, the iconic symbols of metropolitan rationality – the 19th-century bridge and the 20th-century skyscraper – are presented as fragments of a dehumanized environment, from which public space and social life have been totally erased.

The new Manhattan skyline had been a controversial subject since the end of the 19th century. Writing in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1899, Jesse Lynch Williams saw the skyscrapers as "vulgar, impertinent," and yet he could still depict the waterfront as a pastoral motif: "A cluster of modern high buildings which […] may remind you, in

their massive grouping, of a cluster of mountains, with their bright peaks glistening in the sun far above the dark shadows of the valleys in which the streams of business flow, down to the wharves and so out over the world."[1] Few years later, in *The American Scene,* Henry James famously condemned the city's silhouette as the thoughtless product of the economic drive: "You see the pin-cushion in profile, so to speak [...] crowned not only with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history."[2]

Two decades later, Evans's pictures seemed to echo the same ambivalent response to metropolitan change. What is most striking about the artist's exploration of the Manhattan skyline, however, is its ambitious conceptual framework. On close inspection, it appears that all the photographs comprising this early series are centered around the construction of one particular skyscraper in the Financial District, the 111 John Street Building. Several articles in the *New York Times* chronicled the building's history – a 26-story, $ 3,500,000 edifice designed by Ely Jacques Kahn (Buchman and Kahn, Architects) – from real estate transactions begun in December 1927, to the demolition of the old structures occupying the site, to the completion of the steel frame in November 1928, after barely six and a half weeks since its inception.[3]

1. Jesse Lynch Williams, "The Water-Front of New York," *Scribner's Magazine*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1899), pp. 391–92, republished in *New York Sketches* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), p. 8. For examples of the traditional iconography of Lower Manhattan in its natural context, see Clement Souhami, *New York Illustrated* (New York: Success Postal Card Co., 1914). Wayne Attoe, *Skylines: Understanding and Molding Urban Silhouettes* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1981). For an overview, Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890–1931* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp. 28–31; Douglas Tallack, *New York Sights. Visualizing Old and New New York* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), pp. 143–53; David E. Nye, "The Sublime and the Skyline. The New York Skyscraper," in *The American Skyscraper. Cultural Histories*, edited by Roberta Moudry (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 255–69.

2. Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1907), pp. 76–77.

3. See, for example, "Plans $3,500,000 Skyscraper For Blockfront on John St.," *New York Times*, April 29, 1928, p. N22; "Building Plans Filed," *New York Times*, July 17, 1928, p. 37; "New Steel Record," *New York Times*, November 18, 1928, p. RE1; "Workmen to Receive Awards," *New York Times*, February 1, 1929, p. 49.

Even more striking, internal evidence indicates that for at least six months Evans returned exactly to the same spots to produce serial records of the growing city, photographing the evolution of the building from two distinct vantage points on the westernmost section of the Brooklyn Bridge, possibly en route to or from his Brooklyn Heights apartment.

In one series, Evans contrasted the skeleton of the John Street Building and the smokestacks of the New York Steam Company plant with two roof watertanks in the foreground, thus forming a contrapuntal composition of traditional and modernist subjects against the backdrop of the city's fabric (figs. 15–20).[4] In a second sequence, the horizontal pattern of the skyscraper's steel frame progressively emerges as a graphic counterpoint to the vertical smokestacks of the power plant, tucked between the 59 Wall Street and the Doherty Buildings in the background; in the lower section of the photographs, a different tempo of urban change is marked by the turnover of advertising posters on a billboard (figs. 16–23).[5]

Programmatic in concept and anonymous in style, these photographs look like time-lapse sequences commissioned by architectural magazines to document the "rapidity in construction" afforded by new building techniques.[6] Yet Evans never intended this cinematic method, however accurate in its repetition of the vantage point, as a scientific, or even as a professional, protocol. Using two different, probably hand-held, cameras, on each occasion the photographer varied the framing to include or exclude peripheral

4. The photographer's point of reference appears to be the intersection of the ziggurat pyramid on top of the Bankers Trust Company Tower with the Chase National Bank Building. On the photographer as a distant observer of the city, see Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City. New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (New York: New Press, distributed by W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 105–07.

5. Evans's specific interest in this section of Lower Manhattan is further confirmed by a contemporary negative picturing the same confrontation of skyscraper and smokestacks in reverse shot, looking down from the Doherty Building at 60 Wall Street (fig. 92).

6. See for example "A Striking Example of Rapidity in Construction," *Architectural Record,* Vol. 15, No. 5 (May 1904), pp. 484–86.

elements of the scene, such as the prominent silhouette of the Singer Building on the right or the bridge trussing in the foreground. By so doing, Evans allowed himself to improvise on a self-assigned theme; or, most probably, he identified his theme through a recursive procedure of visual investigation.[7]

The systematic character of these otherwise unremarkable views indicates that the artist's very first forays into photography in the fall of 1928 were part of a larger undertaking on the transformation of New York at a crucial juncture in the city's history. By definition fragmentary and intentionally ambiguous, this work in progress has remained undetected by scholars and critics. Yet, Evans continued to pursue this unfinished project until 1933–1934, shifting progressively his attention from the modernist skyscrapers in the Downtown and Midtown areas to the older, vernacular structures of the city's past.

1.2 An unfinished project

Except for few pictures taken during the ticker-tape parade honoring Charles Lindbergh on June 13, 1927 (figs. 120–122), Evans's views of the New York skyline represent his first surviving attempt to articulate a visual response to the modernist American city of the 1920s.

Born in St. Louis in 1903, Evans grew up in Kenilworth, an affluent Chicago suburb, in Toledo, Ohio, and in New York, where he attended high school in 1920 and where he lived again in 1924–1925.[8] As an adolescent in Kenilworth and later as a young

7. Interviewed by Leslie K. Baier in 1979, Hanns Skolle remembered that he and Evans "used to take long walks over the Brooklyn Bridge," and that on one such occasion he prompted his friend to photograph the bridge itself. See James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 77.

8. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 34; Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 23–24; Paul Cummings, *Oral history interview with Walker Evans, 1971 Oct. 13-Dec. 23,* Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A partial transcript is in *Artists in Their Own Words. Interviews by Paul Cummings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp. 83–100.

student at Phillips Academy and Williams College, he read books by Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, e. e. cummings, and T. S. Eliot; during the same period, he became interested in writing.[9] Between 1926 and 1927, Evans continued his education independently in Paris, often visiting Sylvia Beach's bookstore Shakespeare & Co., which was regularly attended by James Joyce. Back in New York, however, Evans's uncompromising standards blocked his creative impulse. As he recalled later in his life, it was Joyce's intimidating model that proved impossible to overcome: "He was my god. That, too, prevented me from writing. I wanted to write like that or not at all."[10]

Although Evans was still drafting short stories when he began photographing in New York in the fall of 1928, by then he had all but abandoned his literary aspirations. Significantly, the only piece of writing that Evans managed to publish in his early years – a translation of few pages from Blaise Cendrars's novel *Moravagine* – appeared in the August 1929 issue of *Alhambra* that carried also his first published photograph, showing the construction of the new Lincoln Building on 42nd Street (fig. 396). In the contributors' page, Evans was presented as "uneducated, unattached, and unemployed. He has lived in Montana, Antibes, the Quartier Latin and Connecticut. He has been working with the camera on Manhattan for the last year or so."[11]

While this characterization of the young photographer as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* was ironic, if not altogether dishonest – Evans had never lived in Montana and sojourned in Southern France only briefly in 1927 – its implicit chronology is fundamentally correct.

9. Six original issues of the *Little Review* dating from 1917–19, with contributions (among others) of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Hart Crane, as well as chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses*, were in Evans's library at the time of his death (WEA 1994.265.372–377). Evans was also a regular reader of *The Dial*. An original copy of E. E. Cummings's *is 5*, published in 1926, was in the artist's library at the time of his death: Maria Morris Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," in Douglas Eklund, Mia Fineman, Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000), pp. 6–12.

10. Cummings, *Artists in Their Own Words*, p. 85.

11. See *Alhambra*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August 1929), pp. 34–35, 46 and 27.

More than 500 negatives in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum and about 100 vintage prints at the Getty Museum, taken between 1928 and 1934, bear witness to the artist's selective appropriation of modern urban subjects, including new skyscrapers under construction (looking up from street level, and viceversa), sidewalk scenes (workers, loafers, couples, passers-by), the sites of capitalist production (industrial buildings, power plants, smokestacks, grain elevators), and the symbols of conspicuous consumption (advertising billboards, shop windows, posters, and signs).

Published in art and architectural magazines and exhibited on several occasions in the early 1930s, these photographs show Evans's protracted interest in the big city as a locus for the investigation of key modernist issues, as well as the artist's willingness to contribute to a wider debate, which at the time encompassed the fields of photography, architecture, painting, cinema, and literature. In terms of subject matter and discursive treatment, Evans's first photographs resonate with the work of numerous intellectuals who at the time were exploring new ways to represent – and thus to comment upon – the radical transformation of the American urban scene. At the end of the 1920s, the earlier generation of "skyscraper primitives," who had defined its aesthetic around the Armory Show, the Woolworth Building, and the father-figure of Alfred Stieglitz, was giving way to an heterogeneous network of artists, writers, magazines, galleries, and museums, for whom the modern skyscraper was less an undisputed symbol of cosmopolitanism than the controversial expression of technology, commercialism, and national identity.[12]

Evans's interest in the discourse on the American metropolis is indicated by the titles he adopted for his first published photographs and portfolios: "New York in the Making," "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," "Port of New York." His

12. Dickran L. Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives. Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910–1923* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975); Alan Trachtenberg, "Image and Ideology: New York in the Photographer's Eye," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (August 1984), pp. 453–64; Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing. Modern Art and National Identity 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

commitment to urban issues, however, was not limited to the high period of photographic modernism. But even later in the 1930s, when he developed his defining body of work on the vernacular architecture of small-town America, Evans continued to investigate the contemporary city with his characteristically clinical eye. In 1933, for instance, he worked on assignment in Havana and its vicinities for a series of photographs to accompany Carleton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba*, a forceful indictment of the Machado dictatorship.[13] As John Tagg has recently argued, in Havana Evans found a dialectical counterpart to New York's political and cultural ebullience.[14] Evans's enthusiasm for this peculiarly urban experience is recorded in a diary entry written between July and August 1933: "[Havana] is a frontier town still, and half savage; forgetful and unsafe. […] When you are still bewildered you notice more things, as in a drunk. I was drunk with a new city for days".[15] It is all the more significant that these notes were not written under the immediate spell of an exotic experience, but after Evans returned from his three-week stay in Cuba, mixing the memory of his eye-opening immersion in the city with a stringent analysis of its anthropological condition.

While most of the photographic portfolios exhibited by Evans in the early 1930s confirm his ongoing dedication to the theme of the city.[16] However, it is a handwritten

13. Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba*, with 31 aquatone illustrations from photographs by Walker Evans (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1933).

14. Tagg speaks of New York and Havana in 1933 as "*two* centers of social unrest and two contexts ripe with cultural revolution": "Crime Story. Walker Evans, Cuba and the Corpse in a Pool of Blood," *Photographies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 2009), pp. 79–102, esp. 90, with reference to Judith Keller, *Walker Evans. The Getty Museum Collection* (Malibu, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), p. 59. See also Jordan Bear, "In the Morgue: Censorship, Taste and the Politics of Visual Circulation in Walker Evans's Cuba Portfolio," *Visual Resources*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2007), pp. 221–43 and Mary N. Woods, "Our Man in Havana: Walker Evans' Photographs for *The Crime of Cuba*," in *Camera Constructs. Photography, Architecture, and the Modern City*, edited by Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 195–210.

15. Quoted in Tagg, "Crime Story", p. 79; see also Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 176.

16. For an overview, see David Campany, *Walker Evans: The Magazine Work* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2014), pp. 7–21.

checklist of 36 photographs "Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater", now among Evans's papers at the Metropolitan Museum, that best exemplifies his critical understanding of the modern metropolis. Again, even a cursory examination of the brief captions that he jotted down around 1933 indicates that the main subject of this porfolio was the cultural geography of Greater New York: "Chrysler Building," "Broadway lights," "New York Barge Canal Terminal," "Brooklyn power house," "Coney Island," "Union Square," "Lexington Avenue & 42nd".[17]

It is telling that the largest sequence assembled by Evans before his 1938 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was a personal portrait of the modern metropolis at the time of the Wall Street crash. As we will see, the identification of the corresponding photographs allows for a reconstruction of a coherent body of work that anticipates by several years the visual strategies – such as formal juxtaposition and avant-garde montage – later adopted in *American Photographs*, the book that accompanied the MoMA exhibition. The "Russian" series, probably sent to the Soviet Union for an exchange exhibition that never took place, represents Evans's informed contribution to the cinematic genre of the "city symphony" that took shape internationally during the 1920s and influenced photography as well.[18] At the same time, it should be seen as the young artist's counter-image of the American metropolis, expressely crafted for consideration in the highly-politicized circles of the Moscow avant-garde.

17. The checklist (WEA1994.250.4 [3]) is reproduced in *Unclassified. A Walker Evans Anthology*, edited by Jeff L. Rosenheim in collaboration with Alexis Schwarzenbach (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Scalo, 2000), p. 173. While the photographs included in the series appear to be taken in 1929–1931, the checklist seems connected to an exhibition mentioned by Evans's in a diary entry for the summer of 1933: see Tagg, "Crime Story," pp. 90 and 100, note 53, and Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 219.

18. While the genre was inaugurated by Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of the Big City*, 1927), a notable anticipation was Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921). See Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 150–54.

During the 1930s, before and after his collaboration with the Photographic Unit of the Resettlement Administration, Evans repeatedly set forth the idea of a photographic book on the modern urban experience. The first instigation may have come from conversations with Lincoln Kirstein, his mentor and friend, who published four portfolios of his photographs in the literary magazine he co-directed, *Hound & Horn*, between 1930 and 1934. Kirstein seemed to have in mind the ambitious project of a photographic book on the American city in 1933, when he presented a selection of Evans's photographs of Victorian architecture – made under his direction during the three preceding years – at the Museum of Modern Art: "Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis and Philadelphia – he wrote – await the tender cruelty of Evans' camera."[19] While the book never materialized, Evans cultivated the idea for several years. Writing to Ernestine Evans, his editor at J. B. Lippincott, in February 1934, he sketched the outline of his quintessential American city, industrial and middle-class:

> An American city is the best, Pittsburgh better than Washington. I know more about such a place. I would want to visit several besides Pittsburgh before deciding. Something perhaps smaller. Toledo, Ohio, maybe. Then I'm not sure a book of photos should be identified locally. American city is what I'm after. So might use several, keeping things typical. The right things can be found in Pittsburgh, Toledo, Detroit (a lot in Detroit, I want to get in some dirty cracks, Detroit's full of chances). Chicago business stuff, probably nothing of New York, but Philadelphia suburbs are smug and endless.[20]

19. Lincoln Kirstein, "Walker Evans' Photographs of Victorian Architecture," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 1, 1933), p. 4.

20. The unfinished letter – written in Hobe Sound, Florida, "in grateful seclusion" – is reprinted in Jerry L. Thompson and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 98.

With his peculiar penchant for lists, Evans went on to enumerate possible subjects, including "Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful stuff, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay."[21]

Although none of these plans included New York, a specific project based on the American metropolis resurfaced in 1937, after the end of Evans's collaboration with the Resettlement Administration. In his application for a Guggenheim Fellowhship, the photographer proposed to "further a current photographic project undertaken in New York upon the general subject of metropolitan social analysis, aiming to produce non-tendentious contemporary history in pictures. If possible, to extend this work to other American cities."[22]

Interestingly, for a second proposal submitted in 1939, Evans modified the initial scheme to include both Middletown and Metropolis, stressing even further the impersonal, almost statistical character of his visual exploration:

> Future work will concentrate somewhat more on cities and towns in this country, and will emphasize people. From this work, a book of reproductions will be made which is to be a catalog of people and environments of this time, general and anonymous, national rather than regional.[23]

21. Quoted in Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 90.

22. In the very first sentence of the application, Evans proposed to "complete a set of photographs on the life of a cotton tenant farmer family in Alabama" (Walker Evans fellowship application, Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1937). Evans was referring to the project he undertook in 1936 with James Agee for an article to be published in *Fortune*, which eventually appeared in book form as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

23. Evans, application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, October 28, 1939, quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 427.

Finally, Evans received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1940 (the second ever awarded to a photographer, following the one received by Edward Weston in 1937) for his first completed urban project, which included candid portraits of commuters in the New York subway – a work that eventually was published as a book in 1966 under the title *Many Are Called*.[24] Although it did not depict the urban environment, the project on subway passengers was a counter-portrait of New York and of its citizens in the vein of Daumier's *Third-Class Carriage* (1864).

Throughout his life, Evans continued to portray the urban scene. First as a photographer and then, from 1945 to 1965, as a picture editor for *Fortune* magazine, he developed a significant number of portfolios that thematized the identity and the transformation of post-war American cities, such as Bridgeport, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York.[25]

In 1956, Evans returned to photograph the Financial District after a quarter-century from his first explorations in downtown Manhattan. Interestingly, the 580 photographs that he took on such occasion appear to duplicate the same urban themes that

24. Walker Evans, *Many Are Called* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), with an introduction by James Agee. Eight photographs from the subway series were published in the mid-1950s with an introduction by Agee: "Rapid Transit: Eight Photographs," *i.e. Cambridge Review* (Winter 1955–1956), pp. 16–25. The most thorough study on this project remains Sarah Greenough's "Many Are Called and Many Are Chosen. Walker Evans and the Anonymous Portrait," in *Walker Evans. Subways and Streets* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991), pp. 13–46. Evans received a second Guggenheim Fellowship in 1959.

25. In July 1939, Evans contributed one photograph to *Fortune*'s special issue devoted to New York City (Vol. 20, No. 1), p. 145. A selection of his *Fortune* urban portfolios organized in chronological order includes "In Bridgeport's War Factories," Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 1941), pp. 87–92, 156, 158–62; "Labor Anonymous," Vol. 34, No. 5 (November 1946), pp. 152–53; "Chicago: A Camera Exploration," Vol. 35, No. 2 (February 1947), pp. 112–21; "Chicago River: The Creek That Made a City Grow," Vol. 44, No. 2 (August 1951), pp. 91–103; "'Downtown': A Last Look Backward," Vol. 54, No. 4 (October 1956), pp. 157–62; "On The Waterfront," Vol. 62, No. 5 (November 1960), pp. 144–50; "When 'Downtown' Was a Beautiful Mess," Vol. 65, No. 1 (January 1962), pp. 100–6; "The Athenian Reach," Vol. 69, No. 6 (June 1964), pp. 138–42. Occasionally, Evans also photographed in London: see for example "The London Look," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 108, No. 4 (April 1958), pp. 114–19.

he had depicted in the late 1920s: skyscrapers, passers-by, shop windows, signs, and the Manhattan skyline seen from the river.[26] At 52, Evans seemed to follow in the steps of Eugène Atget, the much-admired French photographer who in his later life often revisited his familiar subjects to document the disappearance of old Paris.

In the perceptive text that accompanied the nine photographs selected for publication in *Fortune* magazine, Evans staked out his agenda with striking clarity. While the economic "methods and personalities" of Wall Street had changed dramatically since the 1930s, he remarked, the eye of the camera scanned a city that had remained virtually unaltered:

> its cacographic towers; its peeling lunch joints; its meek little Morgan Bank looking like a fairly respectable Indianapolis branch office; its ubiquitous hardware shops glutted with sleazy pliers – all this familiar furniture looks almost exactly the way it looked thirty years ago, down to the lapel cut of suits worn by passing bankers.[27]

Cunningly telescoping from the Manhattan skyline to the detail of a banker's suit, Evans crafted a literary image of the city that no single picture could provide. At a time when a real estate boom was going to reshape the face of the city in dramatic ways, he maintained, photographs could offer but a "last look backward," obliging the viewer to question the present and the future of the visible city. Eschewing nostalgia, he brought his clinical eye to bear upon the city and upon photography itself.

The consequences of this new economic cycle were recorded in the first photograph of the portfolio, showing the demolition of the Mutual Life Insurance Co. Building

26. See the strips of 35mm negatives in the Walker Evans Archive, 1994.253.638.1-580.

27. "'Downtown': A Last Look Backward," p. 157. The "sleazy pliers" had recently been the subject of another Evans portfolio: see "Beauties of the Common Tool," *Fortune*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (July 1955), pp. 103–07.

(Clinton & Russell, 1882–84, 1892), to make room for One Chase Manhattan Plaza (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1957–1964).[28] Perhaps it is not by chance that a second photograph, on the following page, showed "The new Post Office annex in construction, Pine Street," progressively hiding the H. L. Doherty & Co. Building behind it: it was precisely in this older building that the young Evans had worked as a clerk in the 1920s, and it was there that he had taken many of his very first photographs, looking out at the changing metropolis from the heights of Wall Street.

1.3 Historiographical issues

Despite the abundance of scholarly studies published in the past four decades, Evans's protracted interest in the modern city has remained virtually unrecognized. In general, critics have tended to stress the artist's dedication to vernacular subjects in the middle years of the 1930s as a distinctive character of his work and of his contribution to an indigenous American art. From this perspective, the metropolitan photographs that occupied Evans at the end of the 1920s have been considered as purely formal studies devoid of any conceptual relevance, alien to both the subjects and the style that characterized his more mature achievements.[29]

The historiographical neglect surrounding Evans's early work can be explained in many ways, perhaps beginning with the relative inaccessibility of primary sources on Evans's early work until the mid-1990s, when the first systematization of the artist's *œuvre* was undertaken by the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and by the Metropolitan

28. "Chase to Raze Old Buildings," *New York Times*, May 10, 1955, p. 43. The Mutual Life offices had been vacant since May 1950: "Chase Bank Buys Nassau St. Block," *New York Times*, February 24, 1955, p. 43.

29. See Mora, *The Hungry Eye,* pp. 14–15.

Museum in New York.[30] Before then, the amplitude of Evans's work was hardly known beyond the restricted circles of photographic estimators. The re-edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1960 and of *American Photographs* in 1962 signalled a general disinterest for the work Evans did before and after the 1930s, while at the same time reinforcing the popular recognition of his photographs of the Depression: as Gilbert Seldes remarked in his 1938 review of *American Photographs*, "The significant local detail is never missing; but the universal American feeling is always captured."[31] This approach was confirmed in the retrospective curated by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971, in which Evans's urban work of the late 1920s was greatly underrepresented.[32] In 1982, for the first time, the publication of *Walker Evans at Work* offered an overview on the artist's entire production and reproductions of his work from the 1920s, but the lack of an adequate introduction left these materials in a critical void.[33]

Yet, the underestimation of Evans's early work is due, at least in part and perhaps unintentionally, to the artist himself. In his late interviews following the 1971 retrospective,

30. The *catalogue raisonné* of Evans's vintage prints in the collection of the Getty Museum was published in 1995: see Keller, *Walker Evans*, pp. 3–57. The Walker Evans Archive, which includes the photographer's negatives and personal papers, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1994 from John T. Hill, the executor of the Evans Estate. The acquisition prompted the first major study of Evans's early work, which appeared six years later: Douglas Eklund, "Exile's Return: The Early Work, 1928–34," in *Walker Evans,* pp. 28–53. A substantial number of Evans's vintage prints are also held in anonymous collections in Europe and in the United States: see Jean-François Chevrier, Allan Sekula, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Walker Evans and Dan Graham* (Rotterdam: Witte de With and New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992); *Walker Evans,* edited by Mónica Fuentes Santos (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre, 2008); James Crump, *Walker Evans: Decade by Decade* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

31. Gilbert Seldes, "No Soul in the Photograph," *Esquire*, Vol. 10, n. 6 (December 1938), p. 242.

32. John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971).

33. Jerry L. Thompson, "Walker Evans: Some Notes on His Way of Working," in Thompson and Hill, *Walker Evans at Work,* pp. 9–17.

he expressed ambivalent attitudes toward his own photographs of 1928–1930. As he told Leslie Katz in a conversation published in *Art in America*,

> When I came back to the United States I began to make many photographs. Even then I didn't take it seriously, I suppose, until I showed them to other people. [...]
> I had a few prescient flashes and they led me on. I found I wanted to get a type in the street, a 'snapshot' of a fellow on the waterfront, or a stenographer at lunch. That was a very good vein. I still mine that vein. [...]
> I did do some wrong things when I first started to use a camera, but very quickly and very early on I learned the true straight path for me, the path of getting away from 'arty' work, the obviously beautiful.[34]

Three years later, in an interview for the *New York Times* with James Mellow (his future biographer), Evans was even more straightforward in his dismissal of his early work:

> I took pictures during that first burst of rebuilding in New York. The skeleton of the Chrysler Building going up and a few things like that. But it's not really my subject.[35]

And again, speaking to a class of Harvard students in 1975 (two days before he died), the photographer referred to his early work, somewhat belittingly, as "those things":

34. Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (March-April 1971), pp. 83, 85, 88.

35. James R. Mellow, "Walker Evans Captures the Unvarnished Truth," *New York Times*, December 1, 1974, pp. 38.

> I still have some of those things around. They have little style to begin with; they are straight at least! But unartistic. […] Looking at what I was doing, most people didn't think it was anything at all. It was just a wagon in the street or anybody, but that turned out to be what I presume to say was its virtue.[36]

Observations of this kind have generally been understood as implicit disavowals of Evans's entire early work. Yet, while it is relatively easy to identify the artist's "good vein" in pictures like *Longshoreman, South Street* (1928) and *Girl in Fulton Street* (1929), Evans never singled out those photographs that he deemed "wrong." In his late interviews, he appeared to be less interested in his intellectual biography than in addressing "the meaning of quality in photography's best pictures," as he wrote in a 1969 essay on the issue of "quality" in art.[37] Similar concerns informed his dedication to the students of Yale University, where he taught from 1956 to 1975, as well as the public lectures that he delivered during the 1960s.[38]

Perhaps the only explicit manifestation of Evans's self-criticism can be gleaned from a passing remark that he made in conversation with Leslie Katz in 1971. Referring to his own first photographs, he noted:

> Some of them are romantic in a way that I would repudiate now. Even some of those Brooklyn Bridge things – I wouldn't photograph them that way now. I developed a much straighter technique later on. But in 1928,

36. "Walker Evans on Himself," edited by Lincoln Caplan, *The New Republic*, November 13, 1976, p. 24.

37. See Evans, "Photography," in *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 171.

38. See John T. Hill, *Walker Evans. Lyric Documentary* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006) and Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (Göttingen: Steidl and New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

> ’29 and ’30 I was apt to do something I now consider romantic and would reject. I hadn’t learned to be more straight about things.[39]

The romantic “Brooklyn Bridge things” mentioned by Evans were a series of photographs that he took on various occasions in 1929–1930, three of which illustrated the first edition of Hart Crane’s poem *The Bridge*.[40] These remarks are particularly telling in view of the fact that a 1929 image of the Brooklyn Bridge opened the catalog of the retrospective exhibition Evans had just mounted at the Museum of Modern Art.[41] It is also significant, however, that this specific passage was edited out from the published interview. While Evans’s published remarks of the early 1970s consistently attacked “arty,” “romantic,” and “obviously beautiful” photographs, he clearly has second thoughts about pinpointing specific photographs of his own as negative examples.

As we have seen, the amount of negatives depicting New York City that he cared to select and preserve, the persistent project of a book on the American city, and the extended series “Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater” somehow contradict his later misgivings. This contradiction may be explained by Evans’s tendency to associate notions of photographic “artiness” and “romanticism” with the contested figure of Alfred Stieglitz:

> I was stimulated by Stieglitz. When I got around to looking at photography I found him somebody to work against. He was artistic and

39. This passage from the Katz interview (1971) was published posthumously by Jerry L. Thompson and John T. Hill (the executor of the Walker Evans Estate) in *Walker Evans at Work*, p. 42.

40. Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (Paris: The Black Sun Press, 1930). Evans’s photographs are discussed in Gordon K. Grigsby, “The Photographs in the First Edition of *The Bridge*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1962), pp. 5–11 and in Alan Trachtenberg, “Walker Evans’s Brooklyn Bridge,” in *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, second edition 1979), pp. 185–93.

41. Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, p. 23.

romantic. It gave me an esthetic to sharpen my own against – a counter-esthetic.[42]

Behind this oppositional stance, for all his life Evans concealed an unresolved relationship with Stieglitz and his photographs, which in turn affected the evaluation of his own early work. In private, Evans could be contemptuous to the point of defamation: as he confessed in a handwritten note that he cared to preserve in his personal archive, "Alfred Stieglitz appears to me to be a Greenwich Village Wagnerian psychopath-poseur who would in fact be creeping and muttering around Village fringes were it not for cash support he has had all his life."[43] In public statements, however, Evans used his literary abilities to sublimate his disdain: "It is known that Stieglitz had only one real pleasure aside from his work: that of dismembering and skewering rich, succulent Philistines – *au jus*."[44]

Peter Bunnell has been the first to suggest that the philosophical affinity between Evans and Stieglitz was probably more profound than the former was willing to admit – a point that Jay Bochner has recently developed with reference to the psychological aspects of picture-taking.[45] In both cases, however, the critical discourse has been developed in rather general terms, while the positive influence of Stieglitz's work on Evans's imagery – as opposed to his negative role as a public figure – has received little scrutiny. This issue is relevant in any attempt to reconstruct the visual, rather than the generally

42. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 85.

43. Undated manuscript, WEA 1994.250.7 (7).

44. Evans, "Photography," p. 206.

45. Peter C. Bunnell, "An Introduction to Evans' Work and His Recollections," *The New Republic*, November 13, 1976, p. 28; Jay Bochner, "The Sign of Stieglitz, the Art of Evans," *History of Photography*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 42–50. John Szarkowski, in his introduction to Evans's retrospective in 1971, adopted a more conciliatory – and somehow patronizing – stand toward Evans's critique of Stieglitz: "As it then seemed to Evans, Stieglitz was deplorable for his artiness, and Steichen for his commercialism […]. These judgments were unfair, as Evans later understood and admitted": Szarkowski, "Introduction," in *Walker Evans*, p. 10.

aesthetic, education of Walker Evans as a young artist who began to operate in a crucial moment of transition of American visual culture, betwen the proto-modernism coined by Stieglitz and his circle, the contested influence of European modernism, and the intellectual struggle toward the definition of a national style.

Sometime at the beginning of 1929, only months after he had started his visual exploration of New York, Evans took the opportunity to show his first photographs to Stieglitz, upon the instigation the painter Stefan Hirsch, a common friend.[46] Evans's correspondence of the time shows that the encounter was disappointing in many ways: the only response that he received from Stieglitz was a generic advice to go on working, and apparently the older photographer devoted a significant part of the conversation to his own work. Opposed to Pictorialist romanticism and suspicious of Stieglitz's persona, however, Evans definitely appreciated "some excellent photographs he had made: clouds, wet grass, the rump of a white horse, tha bark of an old tree."[47] In a second letter to his friend Skolle, written in June 1929, Evans mentioned visiting an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs at the Metropolitan Museum, observing that he found "three or four of them very exciting."[48]

Decades later, Evans still manifested his unreserved appreciation for some of Stieglitz's street photographs in an interview with Jonathan Goell, although on that occasion he misremembered (or perhaps misrepresented) the chronology of his first seeing them:

46. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 87–88. Apparently the meeting was instigated by the painter Stefan Hirsch, a common friend.

47. Letter, Evans to Skolle, March 17, 1929 (WEA 1994.260.25 [10]), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 141.

48. Evans, unsent letter to Hanns Skolle, June 23, 1929, WEA 1994.260.25 (17). Most probably, Evans either saw Stieglitz's photographs displayed in the "Met's Room for Recent Acquisitions" in early 1929 or visited the Print Study Room at a later moment: for information about Stieglitz donation to the Met in 1928 and on the following exhibition history, see Malcolm Daniel, "The Big Three," in Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand. Masterworks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010), p. 23.

> Some of his earlier work was extremely close to what I desired, and was good. I can recall specific Paris street scenes made around 1906 – very unlike Stieglitz, really – very simple and true, and un-manipulated, un-artistic, plain straight photography work. He would go off in that direction and then retreat from it and get all fuzzed up later on doing self-consciously beautiful things, instead of very plain work in the streets, which was what appealed to me. I thought they were great, but I didn't see them until later on.[49]

In addition to Stieglitz's photographs, a significant example is Evans's repeated celebration of Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* (1916) as the one photograph that caught his attention when he browsed the issues of *Camera Work* at the New York Public Library in the mid-1920. In 1971, asked by Paul Cummings whether he had ever been influenced by older photographers, Evans responded negatively, except for this specific image by Strand: "It was strong and real, it seemed to me. And a little bit shocking – brutal."[50] A minor, but significant clue to Evans's belabored construction of his own genealogy is in an unpublished note probably written in 1938 for the colophon of *American Photographs*. In addition to Ralph Steiner, Berenice Abbott, Ben Shahn, Hanns Skolle, and others, the list of acknowledgements included a line "To Paul Strand for excitement from two | pictures in Camera work vol no." Unfortunately, Evans never specified which photograph had influenced his work besides *Blind Woman*; it is significant, however, that at a later moment he felt the need to temperate and to circumbscribe his debt "To *the early work* of Paul Strand," replacing the word "excitement" with "*stimulation*."[51]

49. Jonathan Goell, "Walker Evans Recalls Beginning," *Boston Sunday Globe*, September 19, 1971, p. 53.

50. Cummings, *Artists in Their Own Words*, p. 88.

51. This list of acknowledgements was never published in *American Photographs* or in any publication by Evans. Italics are mine.

If, according to John Szarkowski, "The tracing of influences in photography is at best a perilous business," contemporary criticism has taken a different path altogether, reducing the investigation of the visual culture that shaped Evans's early program and aesthetic to a generic reference to the European avant-garde.[52] *Vis-à-vis* the plain, classic record of Middletown that shaped the aesthetic of *American Photographs*, it has been common to dismiss these "photographic experiments" as indebted to either Cubism or Constructivism.[53] Judith Keller, for instance, has discussed Evans's first photographs of the Brooklyn Bridge (1929–1930) as "radically Constructivist compositions," but "finally reminiscent of Pictorialist Alvin Langdon Coburn's 1910 collection of New York views."[54] For Maria Morris Hambourg, the "handful of beautiful but rather empty pictures [that] he made in this mode" are "scattershot" and fundamentally unoriginal, while Gilles Mora has underscored the "stylistic mannerisms that he had picked up from a study of the Bauhaus."[55] Finally, Douglas Eklund has described Evans's earliest efforts as "the kind of eminently salable picture that perfectly epitomized – with its jazzy angle shots and multiple exposures – the incorporation of the 'New Vision' aesthetic in more straightforward commercial culture."[56] Historians basing their judgements on notions of authorship and style have been draconian in their judgement: for Peter Hales, Evans "would do almost no important or interesting photographic work after 1941."[57]

Clearly, deeper cultural factors have been at play in this critical dismissal. Above the negative evaluations of Evans's early photographs looms a set of larger, unresolved questions, such as the relationship between American photography and the other

52. Szarkowski, "Introduction," in *Walker Evans*, p. 17.

53. Mora, *The Hungry Eye*, pp. 16, 28.

54. Keller, *Walker Evans*, pp. 5, 6.

55. See Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," in *Walker Evans*, p. 18; Mora, *The Hungry Eye*, p. 15.

56. Eklund, "Exile's Return," in *Walker Evans*, p. 36.

57. Peter Bacon Hales, *Silver Cities. Photographing the American Urbanization, 1839–1939* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), p. 466. In 1941, Evans completed his series on New York subway riders.

visual arts during the 1920s and the education of the artist as a young cosmopolitan writer-turned-photographer.

In general, the reception of Evans's earliest work appears to reflect and to hypostatize the unresolved disjuncture with European values that characterized the development of American modernism. In the fields of architecture, painting, literature, and photography, before and after the Armory Show of 1913, the American discourse on technology and the machine was often continuous with an attempt to shape a national aesthetic based on the celebration of pragmatic efficiency and on the rebuttal of the abstract, academic principles of the Old World.[58]

Between 1929 and 1930, with the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art and of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, this debate expanded into new spheres of cultural production. A case in point is a public roundtable on the question "Nationalism in Art – Is It an Advantage?" hosted by the Whitney on February 23, 1932, featuring William Zorach and Richard F. Lahey on the affirmative side versus Maurice Sterne and Joseph Pollet supporting the international view. For the final verdict, a jury of museum directors voted almost unanimously in favor of nationalism and against cosmopolitanism.[59]

Within weeks, the issue of indigenous art was revamped by Katharine Grant Sterne in a review essay titled "American vs. European Photography" published in *Parnassus,*

58. Celeste Connor, *Democratic Visions. Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle, 1924–1934* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 97ff. See also James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists. The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 53–54.

59. The session was presided by Forbes Watson, editor of *The Arts*; the judges were Juliana R. Force (Whitney Museum), Alfred H. Barr (MoMA), Hardinge Scholle (Museum of the City of New York), Francis Taylor (Worcester Museum), and Herbert Tschudy (Brooklyn Museum): "Debate Over Art Puzzles a Devotee," *New York Times*, February 24, 1932, p. 19 and Edward Alden Jewell, "Should Art Be National?," *New York Times*, February 28, 1932, p. X10.

the journal of the College Art Association.[60] Discussing recent exhibitions at An American Place, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Julien Levy Gallery, the *New York Times* critic was vocal in her praise of the American "reverence for the external fact" over the "necromancy of the Central European sorcerers." Candidly recognizing her own "sublimated patriotism," Sterne did not hesitate to offer an American-centric interpretation of modernism's cultural geography:

> The Russo-German cult of *sachlichkeit* is essentially an American invention. If the Germans have been the prophets of the 'new objectivity' in art, and the Russians its economic and ethical exponents, it is the Americans who, without bothering much with aesthetic theories or manifestoes, have developed the notion until it could safely be transplanted to an alien soil.[61]

Recent critics of Evans's work, perhaps unwittingly, appear to have endorsed the oppositional stance exemplified by this review: privileging the artist's "mature" work, they have tended to marginalize his urban explorations as nothing more than a young artist's incorporation of the fashionable aesthetic of European modernism. This polarized version of 1920s art tends to obliterate the fundamental differences among European movements such as Cubism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus; at the same time, it fails

60. Katharine Grant Sterne, "American vs. European Photography," *Parnassus*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1932), pp. 16–20.

61. Ibid., p. 16. For alternative responses to the issue of defining the Americanness of American art, see Marguerite Zorach, "When Is An American Artist?" and Elsa Rogo, "Americamania," *Space*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (March 1930), pp. 28–30 and 37–39 respectively. Marguerite Thompson Zorach was married with William Zorach, who supported a more conservative position in the 1932 debate on "Nationalism in Art" at the Whitney Museum. The editor in chief of *Space* magazine was Holger Cahill; acting editor was Elsa Rogo (Hirsch's wife); Duncan Ferguson, Edith Gregor Halpert, Stefan Hirsch, Robert Laurent, B. D. Saklatwalla, and Max Weber were members of the board of editors.

to account for Evans's choice of photography as an inherently experiential medium, which entails a privileged relationship to life and reality.

Even more important, the very idea of "Cubist" or "Constructivist" photography is premised upon the oversimplification of the medium's role within those movements. As a matter of fact, despite Picasso's repeated use of photographs as a basis for his paintings, the conceptual appropriateness of the term "Cubist photography" remains open to question.[62] This expression, initially adopted by Alfred Stieglitz for his own photograph *The Steerage* (1907), was later referred to the work of Alvin Langdon Coburn and Paul Strand.[63] Coburn, in particular, used the term rather loosely in the catalog of his 1913 exhibition at the Goupil Gallery in London, speaking of a photograph "almost as fantastic as a Cubist fantasy."[64]

The connection between Cubism and photography resurfaced in the journalistic jargon of the 1920s in connection with the New York photographs of Charles Sheeler

62. Paul Hayes Tucker, "Picasso, Photography, and the Development of Cubism," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (June 1982), pp. 288–99 and Anne Baldassari, "Picasso, 1901–1906: Painting in the Mirror of the Photograph," in *The Artist and the Camera. Degas to Picasso*, edited by Dorothy Kosinski (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art with Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 286–309.

63. While Picasso's endorsement of *The Steerage* was expressed in the early 1910s, it should be noted that Stieglitz's retrospective remarks were made three decades later: "How *The Steerage* Happened" and "Alfred Stieglitz: Four Happenings," *Twice a Year*, No. 8–9 (Spring-Summer 1942, Fall-Winter 1942), pp. 127–31, reprinted in *Photographers on Photography*, edited by Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 129, 133. For Paul Strand, see Van Deren Coke, "The Cubist Photographs of Paul Strand and Morton Schamberg," in *One Hundred Years of Photographic History. Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall,* edited by Van Deren Coke (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), pp. 35–42.

64. *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer. An Autobiography,* edited by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), p. 84. Even at a later point, according to John Szarkowski, "Coburn was clearly trying to emulate abstract painting, but the similarity between his *Vortographs* and Cubism was, to put it generously, more apparent than real.": *Looking at Photographs* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 62. See also Marianne W. Martin, "Some American Contributions to Early Twentieth-Century Abstraction," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 54, No. 10 (June 1980), pp. 158–65, esp. 164.

and Ralph Steiner.[65] In all these instances, however, the original principles of Analytic Cubism were progressively reduced to elementary formal devices – planar compression, geometric organization of subject matter – that never challenged photography's inherent function as a descriptive medium.[66] In 1930, the incompatibility of Cubism and "the old convention of camera perspective" was pointed out by the Precisionist painter Stefan Hirsch, Evans's friend during this period, in a brief essay on the future of the movement written for the inaugural issue of *Space*:

> It is the very 'truthfulness' of the old perspective which allows the easy stimulation of romantic associations inasmuch as the old perspective includes the onlooker in the picture, through a system of lines converging in a point on the horizon, projected there by his own eye.[67]

Although for Hirsch the basic condition of Cubism was its radical abstraction, he conceded that romantic associations could not be totally avoided, since Cubist painting "does not start with purely mathematical symbols, but rather geometricizes physical objects into abstractions." One aspect of Hirsch's interpretation of Cubism probably

65. For examples of the popularization of this notion in the 1920s, see "Cubist Architecture in New York," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (January 1921), p. 72 (photograph by Charles Sheeler); "Experiments in Modernistic Photography," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (July 1921), p. 60 (photographs by Ira W. Martin); "Cubistic Phases of New York – The Camera Reveals, for the First Time, Some New Angles of the City's Architecture," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April 1928), p. 58 (photographs by Ralph Steiner).

66. For a different approach, see John Pultz and Catherine B. Scallen, *Cubism and American Photography, 1910–1930* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 1981). See also Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). See also *Architecture and Cubism,* edited with an introduction by Eve Blau and Nancy J. Troy (Montreal, Canadian Centre for Architecture; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997).

67. Stefan Hirsch, "Concerning Cubism," *Space*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1930), p. 26. Hirsch quoted the artist and critic Leo Katz as a source of his ideas on Cubism: "Letters to the editor," *Space*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (June 1930), p. 31.

shared by Evans is the tension toward anonymity and transcendence: "In its purest manifestations [Cubism is] an attempt at an impersonal strategy, in a historical period of, and as a reaction against, pronounced individualistic tendencies."[68]

The notions of Constructivist and Bauhaus photography often evoked to frame Evans's work remain equally obscure. Scholars like Benjamin Buchloh and Abigail Solomon-Godeau have disputed the medium's purported role as a radical "weapon" in the Constructivist sense;[69] and because of the internal controversies that marked the acceptance of the medium as an art form in Dessau, it has been impossible to outline a definitive "Bauhaus approach" to photography.[70]

Truly, Evans's oblique views of New York skyscrapers seen from either above or below are reminiscent of Alexander Rodchenko's series on "The House at Myasnitskaya Street" taken in 1925 and of László Moholy-Nagy's 1928 photographs from the Berlin Radio Tower, which Evans might have seen during his stay in Paris or, more likely, in publications provided by his German friends in New York, like the painters Hanns Skolle and Stefan Hirsch or the architect Paul Grotz.

Considered retrospectively within the established canon of modernist formalism, Evans's early work may appear at first sight to be timid and far from innovative. However, it would be misleading to judge Evans's dialogue with German, Russian, and French photography of the 1920s as a failed attempt to engage the formal problems

68. Ibid., p. 25.

69. For an overview on photography's role within Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus, see Phillips, "Resurrecting Vision: The New Photography in Europe Between the Wars," in *The New Vision*, pp. 82–89. For more controversial views, see Benjamin H. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, No. 30 (Autumn 1984), pp. 82–119; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (January 1983), pp. 9–14, reprinted in *Photography at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 52–84; and Devin Fore, "The Operative Word Soviet Factography," *October*, No. 118 (Fall 2006), pp. 95–131.

70. Egidio Marzona, *Bauhaus Photography* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), p. xi. See also *Photography at the Bauhaus*, edited by Jeannine Fiedler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990).

of the radical avant-garde. A cultivated young man who regularly attended the istitutions of modern art, fully acquainted with 19th and 20th-century painting, and keenly interested in the issues of contemporary architecture, Evans immediately grasped the specificity of the photographic language and its potential to visualize the complexities of American civilization. An ambitious artist, he soon defined a method of work that privileged the visual *experience* of city – a direct exploration of its spaces, forms, people, and signs – while at the same time entertaining a coded dialogue with the visual *culture* of modernity. It was in the city streets that Evans found (or invented) his own iconology. As he said to the students of the University of Michigan in 1971, "*I go* to the street for the education of my eye and for the sustanance that the eye needs – the hungry eye, and my eye is hungry."[71] Yet his photographic aesthetic – a *tension* toward transparency and anonymity that in later years he defined as a "documentary *style*" – was the product of a continuous, anti-academic reworking of visual and literary sources, models, and tropes.

If Evans ever dedicated any effort to investigating issues of abstraction, few isolated examples of these formalist studies have survived (figs. 670, 674).[72] For the largest part, his photographs of Manhattan dealt with the dynamic visual experience of the common citizen rather than with purely compositional concerns, which informed instead the iconic photographs of the metropolis of Sherril Schell, Margaret Bourke-White, Thurman Rotan, or Edward Steichen (figs. 368, 441). By 1932, as Katharine

71. "Walker Evans, Visiting Artist. A Transcript of His Discussion with the Students of the University of Michigan, 1971" (recorded on October 29, 1971), reproduced in *Photography. Essays & Images*, edited by Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 314. The notion of "documentary *style*" is discussed in Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 87.

72. While Evans used the term "abstraction" rather selectively in the titles of his photographs, it does appear in a handwritten note, datable from 1933 or later, in which he classified the work he had done so far: "1. Americana," "2. People," "3. New York," "4. Interiors," "5. Portraits," "6. Abstractions + Details," "7. Victorian Architecture," "8. Greek Revival Architecture," "9. Cuba / People / Architecture," "10. Copying." See WEA 1994.250.8 (11).

Grant Sterne declared in her review, the “angle-shot” (like other techniques practiced in Europe, such as double exposure and photo-montage) had been surpassed by “von Sternberg’s henchmen and the ordinary news-reel man, prostrating themselves under charging trucks and emulating the Human Fly in frenzied effort to get a new slant on things.”[73] Probably aware of the pitfalls of modernist mannerism, by this date Evans had begun to explore other solutions to the problem of a “stylized” representation of the city: using a large-format camera and mostly adopting a frontal approach, he continued to work in Manhattan, this time focussing on the battered old buildings on South and West Streets that were progressively abandoned as a consequence of the economic depression (figs. 181–192, 250–274).

Independent from style or subject, Evans never abjured his tie with European art. Although later in his life he dubbed himself a “deep-dyed yankee” and recognized his inability to operate photographically beyond the national boundaries, he always underscored the importance of his experience in Paris as an antidote to America’s anti-modernism of the 1920s.[74] Uninterested in specific art movements or manifestos, Evans pursued photography strategically, in the attempt to dislodge ways of seeing that were ingrained in the affluent society of the time:

> mine was the first generation that went to Europe and got a European perspective and technique and came back and applied it to America. [...] I found myself operating direct from the French esthetic and psychological approach to the world: I applied that to the problem of rendering what I saw. I think I operated in reaction to mediocrity and phoniness.

73. Sterne, “American vs. European Photography,” p. 19. The “Human Fly” was probably a reference to the 1923 film *Safety Last*, directed by Fred C. Newmeyer with Sam Taylor and starring Harold Lloyd: see Jacob Smith, “The Adventures of the Human Fly, 1830–1930,” *Early Popular Visual Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (April 2008), pp. 51–66.

74. Newhall, “Walker Evans, Visiting Artist,” p. 318.

> In the late twenties the battle against gentility in the arts and in behavior was still on. Everybody a little bit advanced was busy misbehaving in order to shock gentility.[75]

Although Evans consistently rejected any political reading of his work, occasionally he would propose a highly polemical framework for his early explorations of Manhattan, perhaps recalling the portrayal of the "lost generation" published by Malcom Cowley in 1934: "When the exiles returned from Europe, their normal instinct was to remake the environment, to substitute moral for mechanical values." According to Cowley, however, these young intellectuals faced the impossibility of the task and soon escaped "the city of anger."[76] Evans, instead, liked to think of himself as a combatant on the internal front, who shared his discontent with a cosmopolitan intelligentsia. "My friends were mostly Europeans – he recalled – I was really anti-American at the time."[77] Before he met the stabilizing figure of Lincoln Kirstein (in 1929 or 1930), who was crucial in the development of his later work in the 1930s – Evans drifted in a kaleidoscopic environment of international artists and intellectuals who had emigrated to New York from elsewhere like Paul Grotz, Stefan Hirsch, Hanns Skolle, Ben Shahn, Diego Rivera, and the amateur photographer Iago Galdston – or who had cultivated strong ties with foreign cultures – Berenice Abbott was well connected in France and Germany, while Jay Leyda studied in Moscow in the early 1930s with Sergei Eisenstein.[78] Between 1926

75. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 84.

76. Malcom Cowley, *Exile's Return. A Narrative of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1934), p. 211.

77. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 84. 77. A biographical note accompanying one of Evans's first publications recited: "He has been in Europe where he has studied modern Continental methods": "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1930), p. 454.

78. The photographer's acquaitance with the filmaker and film critic Jay Leyda is particularly interesting in light of Evans's plans to work with film in the early 1930s. Apart from some footage filmed during a trip to Tahiti in 1932 (now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art) and an deluded hopes to collaborate with film director Pare Lorentz, the most significant consequence of Evans's inter-

and 1933, Evans became increasingly aware of contemporary art at home and abroad, mostly through travels, publications, exhibitions, art galleries, and his participation in group shows.

For a generation of young American intellectuals coming of age in the 1920s and suspicious of the commodity culture of their fathers, new stimuli for rejuvenation could be found in all the international movements of the time that worked against the grain. This openness toward all strains of modernist art is reflected in an undated manuscript in the Walker Evans Archive:

> In the 1920's modern meant atonality and cacophany [sic] in music, and abstraction and various distortions in painting, uncommunicable subjective imagery in poetry and automatic writing in prose. Yet we were stimulated by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Bracque [sic], Modigliani, Crane and Stein because they were artists not because they were freaks trying to traffic in something called modern.[79]

Wanda Corn's magisterial study of "transatlantic" modernism in painting and literature provides the most sensitive map of these dialectical transactions between Europe and New York that Evans witnessed, and partly shared, in his formative years.[80] More

est in film is a 1936 scenario in the "city-simphony" style of the 1920s, not unlike Jay Leyda's short film *A Bronx Morning* (1931). The first lines of the scenario read: "5:00 a.m. 1. – Sunrise over downtown Manhattan, from Penn. Ferry. | Silhouette of skyline.": see WEA 1994.250.4 (11). See also Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 153, 341.

79. Unpublished carbon copy manuscript, WEA 1994.250.7 (12). In a letter to Evans dated November 1929, Skolle spoke familiarly about the paintings that he saw at the Chicago Art Institute: "Why, they have El Grecos, Lautrecs, Seurats, Gaugins, blue period Picassos, Matisses, Chiricos and – Bert Elliotts galore. They have the best Modigliano [sic] (beautifully solid construction and surface) I have seen; a double portrait of one Lipchitz and wife." Enclosed with the letter, Skolle sent reproductions of some of these artworks (WEA 1994.260.26 [77]).

80. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, *passim*.

recently, Olivier Lugon has reconstructed the parallel paths treaded by Walker Evans and August Sander toward the establishment of a "documentary style" in photography.[81]

An early manifestation of Evans's complex awareness of European photography can be found in a review essay written for the *Hound & Horn* in 1931. Titled "The Reappearance of Photography," it charted the various phases of evolution and retrenchment experienced by the medium since its invention, up to the recent "valid flowering" and "photo renascence" in Europe.[82] The books considered by Evans included recent monographic publications on the work of Eugène Atget, Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, and Edward Steichen, as well as anthologies like *foto auge* (edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold) and a special number of the graphic art magazine *Arts et métiers graphiques*, entirely dedicated to photography.[83]

Alternating positive and negative examples, Evans subsumed these publications under a general interpretation of photography, which he saw as the art form most adequate to the "post-war state of mind," both for its usefulness in confronting issues of space and time, and for "reflecting swift chance, disarray, wonder, and experiment."[84] "Reflecting" is the key word in this passage: the cogency of the medium, according

81. Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920–1945* (Paris: Macula, 2001). The seminal study on the international debate in the interwar period remains Maria Morris Hambourg and Christopher Phillips, *The New Vision. Photography Between the World Wars. Ford Motor Company Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989).

82. Walker Evans,"The Reappearance of Photography," *The Hound & Horn*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (October-December 1931), pp. 125–28 (quotations pp. 126, 127).

83. The books reviewed were *Atget, Photographe de Paris* (Henri Jonquières; New York: E. Weyhe, 1930); Carl Sandburg, *Steichen the Photographer* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1929); *Die Welt ist Schön. Einhundert Photographische Aufnahmen von Albert Renger-Patzsch* (Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1928); *Photo-Eye. 76 Photoes [sic] of the Period*, edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag dr. Fritz Wedekind, 1929); *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, Numéro spécial consacré à la photographie, No. 16 (1930); *Antlitz der Zeit, Sechzig Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts von August Sander* (Munich: Transmare Verlag/Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1929).

84. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 126.

to Evans, was a consequence of its particular engagement with reality – a mirroring, rather than an artful recomposition, of the world's contradictions, which incidentally had the positive effect of dissolving the notion of authorship in favor of anonymity and transparency.

Evans's blunt critique of the political economy of photography was expressed in a passing remark on the inflation of recent German books ("a publishing venture with political undertones") and in a dismissal of Steichen's work of the 1920s:

> his general note is money, understanding of advertising values, special feeling for parvenu elegance, slick technique, over all of which is thrown a hardness and superficiality that is the hardness and superficiality of America's latter day, and has nothing to do with any person. The publication of this work carries an inverted interest as reflection of the Chrysler period.[85]

Among the photographers reviewed in the *Hound & Horn* essay, only Atget was known for his sustained interest in the city. Evans had been acquainted with his Parisian imagery since 1929, when his new friend Berenice Abbott acquired part of the old photographer's archive in association with Julien Levy, the French collector who in 1931 inaugurated a new art gallery on Madison Avenue devoted to photography and Surrealist art.[86] Evans's appreciation of Atget's work – in direct opposition to Steichen's – is worth quoting at length, for it underscores the masterful balancing of geographical, autobiographical, and metaphorical levels achieved by the French photographer:[87]

85. Ibid., p. 127.

86. Katherine Ware and Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White. Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 19–24.

87. I owe the triad "geography, autobiography, and metaphor" to Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography. Essays in Defense of Traditional Values* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1981), p. 14.

> Apparently he was oblivious to everything but the necessity of photographing Paris and its environs; but just what vision he carried in him of the monument he was leaving is not clear. […] In some of his work he even places himself in a position to be pounced upon by the most orthodox of surréalistes. His general note is lyrical understanding of the street, trained observation of it, special feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail, over all of which is thrown a poetry which is not "the poetry of the street" or "the poetry of Paris," but the projection of Atget's person.[88]

Evans's observation on the "pouncing" of the *surréalistes* (in proper French) signals his awareness of Man Ray's attempt, sometime in the mid-1920s, to incorporate the work of Atget within the sphere of avant-garde art – an episode that Evans may have apprehended from Berenice Abbott, at the time Man Ray's assistant.[89] But various clues suggest that Evans's interest in the principles, if not in the style, of Surrealism went beyond his encounter with Abbott and the work of Atget. It has rarely been observed, for example, that Evans's literary models during his Parisian sojourn in 1926–1927 were not only James Joyce and Charles Baudelaire, but also André Gide and Jean Cocteau.[90] It is also significant that his only literary publication of the time, as we have seen, was

88. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 126.

89. Paul Hill and Tom Cooper, "Interview: Man Ray," *Camera*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (February 1975), p. 40, reprinted in *Dialogue with Photography. Interviews by Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 17–18. An album of Atget photographs owned by Man Ray is reproduced in Susan Laxton, *Paris as Gameboard. Man Ray's Atgets* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2002).

90. Evans mentioned reading Gide and Cocteau in Paris in conversation with William R. Ferris, "Walker Evans, 1974" *Southern Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 42. The handwritten translation of an excerpt of Gide's autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt* (1924) is in the Walker Evans Archive, WEA 1994.250.1.24. An observation on Evans's photography as "conversant with the surrealist revolution" is in Andrei Codrescu, *Walker Evans. Signs* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998) p. 2.

a translation of *Moravagine*, a novel by Blaise Cendrars that is among the prototypical Surrealist books of the 1920s.

However distant from Evans's imagery, an influence of Surrealism (possibly with Dada overtones) may be detected in his habit of appropriating and collecting images from the popular press. Among the artist's papers at the Metropolitan Museum are numerous pages torn from German and American magazines of the 1920s (going as back as 1923), carrying reproductions of painting, drawings, and photographs, often dealing with couples and the opposition man/woman, a theme that he investigated in his early street work and that formed a recognizable thread in the visual narrative of *American Photographs*.[91]

Writing to Hanns Skolle on March 17, 1929, Evans included with his letter a "photo I clipped from the Times some time ago. You may have seen it. Could harly be better, could it? It is a village magic-man in Belgian Congo; sort of medicine man, healer; doctor and preist [sic] combined."[92] In the late 1930s Evans continued to collect photographs from newspapers, mounting the images on stock board individually or in ironic juxtapositions.[93] The results were sometime reminiscent of the photo-montages and of the scrapbooks of John Heartfield and Hannah Höch, but also of popular European magazines such as *Der Querschnitt*.[94] It is also significant that from 1932 to 1935 Evans exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery, which had been crucial for the American reception of both Atget and Surrealist art. Levy's second exhibition, which opened in January

91. See Evans's collection of clippings culled from newspapers and magazines (WEA 1994.250.90) and his "Pictures of the Time" scrapbook, reproduced in Rosenheim *Unclassified*, pp. 212 ff.

92. Letter, Evans to Skolle, March 17, 1929 (WEA 1994.260.25 [10]), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 141.

93. Ibid., pp. 212 ff.

94. Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife. The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993). It should be noted here that one of Evans's earliest photographs – *Sixth Avenue*, 1929 (JPGM 84.XM.956.506) – was reproduced in the *Der Querschnitt*, Vol. 12, No. 8, August 1932, following p. 580.

1932 and was titled "Surréalisme," included works by a vast range of artists that could hardly be labelled as Surrealists, such as Moholy-Nagy and George Platt Lynes.[95]

While Evans never photographed in a proper Surrealist style, occasionally he recorded specific situations – a man's shirt billowing in the wind or a piece of furniture on a Brooklyn sidewalk – which could open up the possibility of a Surrealist reading, despite the ordinariness of the nominal subject and the deadpan style of the photograph.

Levy's version of the Surrealist possibilities of straight photography included enlisting Evans for a series of photographs of gravestones in Connecticut and Massachusetts.[96] The photographer exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery for the first time in February 1932 with George Platt Lynes, and again in May in a group show titled "Photographs of New York by New York Photographers."[97] In 1933 and 1935, his work was at the core of Levy's idea of "anti-graphic" photography – in frontal opposition to Pictorialism and formalism – which led to the ground-breaking exhibition "Documentary and Anti-Graphic. Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans & Álvarez Bravo."[98]

95. Edward Alden Jewell, "A Bewildering Exhibition," *New York Times*, January 13, 1932, p. 27; Ware and Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White*, pp. 41–47.

96. Ware and Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White*, pp. 47–48, including pl. 20, p. 48, taken in Chelmsford, Mass. A 1931 negative showing gravestones in the Boston cemetery is in WEA 1994.256.210. The name of Julien Levy was listed in a "Contempt and hatred for" list that James Agee shared with Evans in 1937: see WEA 1994.250.80 (9), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 75.

97. Ware and Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White*, pp. 68–75. Presented by the gallery as "a sort of New York Atget," Evans received mixed reviews. The anonymous critic of the *New York Times* privileged Lynes's work and critiqued Evans for photographing "without sentiment and with only the faintest undercurrent of satire": "Photographs That Interest," *New York Times*, February 4, 1932, p. 16. Three days later, Helen Appleton Read was more benevolent: "Without exaggeration or falsification, Mr. Evans gives his subject a quality of independent life. […] He does what many artists who strike out new paths for themselves have done before him – he liberates his subjects from the taboos of his time.": "The New Photography," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 7, 1932, p. E6. The 1932 group exhibition included works by Stieglitz, Abbott, and the "newer men," including Thurman Rotan, Wendell MacRae, Walker Evans, and George Platt Lynes: "These Photographs Delight," *New York Times*, May 8, 1932, p. N6.

98. Ware and Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White*, pp. 86–93, 128; *Documentary & Anti-*

Alfred H. Barr brought a sympathetic eye to Evans's flirtation with Surrealism in 1936, when he included one of his photographs in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition that he mounted at the MoMA.[99] Evans continued to cultivate his oblique interest in Surrealist practices as a writer for *Time* in the early 1940s. In his review of Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), an anatomical treatise illustrated by Jan van Calcar, he suggested that these renaissance images could be seen as "stylistic precursors of surrealism; the fantastic effects produced by some of the exposed anatomies have their counterparts in the work of several modern painters, notably Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dali [sic]."[100] In the highly descriptive qualities of medical anatomy, as in photography's objectivizing eye, Evans saw similar possibilities of uncanny imagination.

The artist's repeated claims about the literariness of his photographic work and his disengagement from the photographic culture of his time have been taken *prima facie*. His penchant for literature during the 1920s has led most historians to develop a kind of critical strabism: while looking at his early work as a photographer, they have tended to mention Flaubert and Baudelaire as a background, rather than exploring his awareness of contemporary painting and photography. According to Clement Greenberg, who in 1946 was among the first art critics to appreciate the "transparency" of his photographs,

> 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

Graphic. Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans & Alvarez Bravo, edited by Agnès Sire (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004).

99. See *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, edited by Alfred H. Barr (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 212. The photograph in question – *Outdoor Advertising, Florida, 1934* – was exhibited in the section dedicated to "Artists independent of the Dada-Surrealist movements."

100. [Walker Evans], "Art: Anatomy's 400th," *Time*, August 9, 1943, p. 44. In the 1960s, Evans included the Vesalius treatise in a lecture on "Lyric Documentary" that he delivered on several occasions until his death: see Hill, *Walker Evans. Lyric Documentary*, p. 104.

> modern literature. And in more than one way photography is closer today to literature than it is to the other graphic arts.[101]

John Szarkowski, who wrote authoritatively from his position as director of MoMA's Photography Department, reinforced this point when he remarked that "The major influences on Evans during his early photographic career were intellectuals, writers, and painters."[102] Minimizing the role of photographic influences in favor of other media with a longer intellectual history has often been a critical strategy in the canonization of photographers themselves. Clearly, the progressive erasure of Evans's visual – and specifically photographic – references is a consequence of the critical construction of the originality of his work.

Although Evans was always reticent about his visual models and tended to stress the term "literary" in discussions of his approach, he seemed uncertain as to where to draw the line between the verbal and the visual roots of his thinking:

> I didn't associate with photographers; my friends were writers and painters mostly, and a few musicians. [...] Although I have a feeling that much of my work is literary – or is done by a literate man because I read a great deal – it is still a way from abstract thought into ... feelings abstracted from reality.[103]

101. Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye," *The Nation* (March 9, 1946); reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 63. The Greenberg-Evans connection is discussed in Mike Weaver, "Clement Greenberg and Walker Evans: Transparency and Transcendence," *History of Photography*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (Summer 1991), pp. 128–30. A point not considered in Weaver's insightful analysis is the relation between Greenberg's ideas on photography and Evans's 1931 essay on "The Reappearance of Photography."

102. Szarkowski, "Introduction," in *Walker Evans*, p. 11.

103. Caplan, "Walker Evans on Himself," p. 24.

Few lines recorded in an undated manuscript offers a glimpse on Evans's ambition to bridge the literary and the photographic realms:

> Sad + anger
> that there was no photography like work
> of Henry James or Eliot or Joyce or even Flaubert or Whitman
> Do something about it[104]

Finally, Evans's notion of the literary character of photography can be found in a 1969 essay on the medium's artistic quality, which is in fact the artist's more complete statement about his own style:

> photography seems to be the most literary of the graphic arts. It will have – on occasion, and in effect – qualities of eloquence, wit, grace, and economy; style, of course; structure and coherence; paradox and play and oxymoron.[105]

Evans's unexpected connections with Surrealism point to the larger issue of his visual (as opposed to literary or theoretical) culture in a defining moment of his formation – an issue that has received scant attention and that Evans himself eschewed in public discussions.[106] While a complete reconstruction of Evans's early work and education is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to recognize the intentional openness and

104. WEA 1994.250.10 (1). The sentence "or Joyce or even Flaubert" was added at a later moment.

105. Walker Evans, "Photography," in *Quality. Its Image in the Arts*, edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 169–211, quote p. 170.

106. The photographer Jonathan Goell, who interviewed Evans in 1971 together with Herbert Hamilton and Bob Baker, is to be credited among the very few who did not succumb to the myth of the old master and who tried to question him – albeit with little success – on the issue of his early influences: see Goell, "Walker Evans Recalls Beginning," pp. 53–55.

multidisciplinarity of his approach in order to better gauge the significance of his investigations on the modern city around 1929. Arguably, it is in the very nature of urban photography to engage with the politics of the city's image irrespectful of disciplinary boundaries. Contrary to images meant as descriptions of individual buildings and urban spaces, photographic works intended as discursive interpretations of the city's dynamic present cannot be confined within the narrow limits of the record or the catalog. Especially at the time of Evans's project on New York City, photography's transactions with literature, painting, cinema, and architecture were the norm among the artists that we have come to subsume under the category of modernism. As we have seen, Evans had little interest in the word itself, nor was he interested in experimenting with various media as in the case of Charles Sheeler or Ben Shahn, who were both painters and photographers. Persuaded of the autonomy of the photographic language, he often explored the limits of that language in the attempt to craft new tools for the visual decoding and recoding of the modern metropolis.

1.4 In the archive

A relevant factor that has obscured the meaning of Evans's early work is its *necessary* fragmentariness. At a basic level, most of the photographs that he took in New York are framed and composed in ways that don't allow the viewer to identify the nominal subject, but rather employ formal strategies of decontextualization and defamiliarization. Privileging construction sites and the rear of unrecognizable buildings, but maintaining a highly descriptive technique, Evans captivated the viewer into a conceptual paradox that has disoriented many historians as well. Was the artist interested at all in the specific buildings that he photographed – their function in the economy of the metropolis, their role in the architectural discourse – or did he consider the city as a mere playground for his experimentations?

Historian Oscar Handlin, for example, saw Evans's work as "emphasizing the individual rather than the place" and lamented that for the artist "Coney Island (1929), the Bronx (1933), and 42nd Street (1929) are faces and legs."[107] However, Evans offered different responses to this issue. Aesthetic concerns, related to the definition of photography's role within the system of modern art, led Evans to distinguish between functional photographs with a purely descriptive aim and his own "documentary *style*," intended as a tool for "transcendent" observation.[108] On the other hand, speaking of the photographs of Alabama sharecroppers that he made in 1936 in collaboration with James Agee (published in the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), he stated: "I cared to have certain things read into my work, but I really don't intend to have my ideas and my work and my vision used as political action."[109] Although Evans repeatedly presented his work as "literary," the possibility to effectively "read" the meaning of his photographs has always been a matter of speculation. As he remarked in a late interview,

> I think too much, though, and reading leads to introspective inaction. It's a Hamlet quality. I haven't got a rational structure and the expressible, critical opinion of what the object in front of me means on second thought. I do these things pretty much by instinct, and I have learned to trust that instinct.[110]

Yet Romana Javitz, in recalling Evans's way of working in the 1930s, underscored the artist's willingness to discuss the nominal subjects rather than the style of his photographs:

107. Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1979), p. 243.

108. Both expressions are Evans's: see Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 87.

109. Walker Evans, "The Thing Itself Is Such a Secret And So Unapproachable," *Yale Alumni Magazine*, No. 37 (February 1974), p. 13.

110. Caplan, "Walker Evans on Himself," p. 24.

> Evans is the only photographer I've ever had who didn't talk about photographs. He doesn't talk about photographs, but he does talk about the subject of the photographs, and hence he's much more interesting than most photographers.[111]

It is significant that the only systematic attempts to untangle the implicit discourse of Evans's work have come from Alan Trachtenberg, an American Studies scholar who was among Evans's colleagues at Yale in the last period of the artist's life. Although Trachtenberg has defined *American Photographs* "not a finished thesis, but a continuous process," on various occasions he has confronted the task of deciphering Evans's photographic sequences as systems of signs encoding his interpretation of American material culture.[112]

The only published essay devoted specifically to Evans's urban photographs, however, is by Gilles Mora, a French curator and scholar who was the first to point out the artist's longstanding interest in the theme of the city, from his beginnings in Manhattan until his death. While Mora, as we have seen, has offered a different reading of the New York project in later years, his first assessment rejected a purely formalist approach and favored a notion of photography as a direct confrontation with "the real":

> In Evans's photographs (at least in the small-format snapshots) there is not, and there will never be, the geometric temptation, which consists in

111. From 1929, Javitz was the head of the New York Public Library's Picture Collection. Richard K. Doud, "An Interview with Romana Javitz, 23 February 1965," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1/4, (2001), p. 10.

112. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs. Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), quotation p. 284. See also Trachtenberg's "Walker Evans's 'Message from the Interior': A Reading," *October*, No. 11 (Winter 1979), pp. 5–29 and Lew Andrews, "Walker Evans' American Photographs: The Sequential Arrangement," *History of Photography*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 264–71.

> promoting the subject for its formal organization. On the contrary, what strikes in these first images is their deframing [décadrage], the absolute freedom in confronting the flux of the real and the dynamic spectacle of the city.[113]

Suggestions to investigate in different directions have remained unfollowed. An apt remark, for example, was made by John B. Rohrbach, who has observed that "Evans's transition between 1929 and 1931 from his often abstract urban views to his more ordered, rural architectural documents and his scattering of clearly experimental photographs deserve further analysis."[114]

Among photographic historians, only Peter Bunnell has proposed to consider Evans's *œuvre* as a continuum, a life's work revolving around a limited set of artistic problems that found their first formulation in the late 1920s: "In the projection of his style, from his first pictures in 1928, when he was 24, to the last, Evans did not develop; he simply continued. When he began he had both his themes and his form."[115] From this unifying perspective, Evans's early interest in the modern city appears to be part of a larger concern for the built environment as a palimpsest of cultural signs. As he stated in his

113. "Il n'y a pas et il n'y aura jamais, dans les photos d'Evans, la tentation géométrique (du moins dans les vues prises au petit format), celle de promouvoir l'événement par son organisation formelle. Tout au contraire, ce qui frappe dans ces premières images c'est le décadrage, l'absolue liberté devant le flux du réel et le spectacle mobile de la ville.": Gilles Mora, "Walker Evans et la ville," *Revue française d'études américaines*, Vol. 14, No. 39 (Février 1989), p. 58. For the notion of "deframing," see Pascal Bonitzer, *Décadrages. Peinture et cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéna/Éditions de l'Étoile, 1985), *passim.* and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

114. John B. Rohrbach, "Review of Judith Keller, Walker Evans. The Getty Museum Collection," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 1995), p. 299.

115. Peter C. Bunnell, "An Introduction to Evans' Work and His Recollections," *The New Republic*, November 13, 1976, p. 27.

last public conference, "I am fascinated by man's work and the civilization he's built. In fact, I think that's *the* interesting thing in the world, what man does."[116]

Despite Bunnell's farsighted remark, the continuity of Evans's work from beginning to end is far from evident. Surviving negatives and prints in the two main holdings of his early work – the Metropolitan Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum – form an "archaeological mosaic" that indicates the protracted dedication of the young artist to the theme of the metropolis, but does not present itself immediately as an organic project.[117]

One technical reason for this lack of a systematic order can be related to the whereabouts of the archive, which was dismembered in the last years of Evans's life. These vicissitudes date from 1968, when the Chicago collector Arnold H. Crane approached the artist and managed to buy over 1,000 vintage prints from his personal collection. However, it was the art dealer George Rinhart, with financial support from the English banker Tom Bergen, who persuaded Evans to sell his entire archive of prints (and subsequently of negatives) in 1974–1975 for a lump sum of $100,000. Rinhart immediately turned over the collection to Harry Lunn, another art dealer based in Washington, D.C., who disseminated Evans's prints in private collections and institutions for over 25 years. It was only in 1984 that the J. Paul Getty Museum purchased the Crane collection of prints, which over the years has been increased with further acquisitions to reach a total of about 1,200 items. In 1994, the Metropolitan Museum acquired the remaining negatives and personal papers from the Evans estate.[118]

It is difficult to determine how these transactions have affected the consistency and the physiognomy of Evans's legacy. It is clear from the vintage prints in the Getty

116. Caplan, "Walker Evans on Himself," p. 26.

117. I borrow the term "archaeological mosaic" from Bunnell's characterization of Evans's work for the Farm Security Administration in "An Introduction to Evans's Work," p. 27.

118. Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, pp. 272, 282; Clark Worswick, *Walker Evans. The Lost Work* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Arena Editions, 2000), pp. 10ff.

Collection that Crane's initial selection privileged modernist architectural subjects, apparently chosen (and subsequently catalogued) according to formal principles rooted in the European avant-garde of the 1920s and '30s, which Crane also collected.[119] Clearly, in the context of Crane's collection – which eventually included a substantial group of Man Ray photographs, as well as works by Moholy-Nagy, Brassaï, and Siskind – Evans's early work may seem fragmentary and derivative.[120] Yet, it is plausible to think that the apparent discontinuity of Evans's early work is due to the limited number of pictures that have survived over the years. For example, it is strange that no negatives have been preserved of photographs that were reprinted several times (e.g. fig. 62), or, conversely, that apparently no print is available for many negatives in the Evans Archive at the Metropolitan Museum. The total number of Evans's known images for this early period – including negatives and prints – is relatively small considering that he worked on the same urban themes consistently from mid-1928 to 1930 and occasionally until about 1934. Some may have been lost, but it is evident from the remaining 35 mm. negatives that the photographer used to cut out single frames (sometimes including two or three variants) and to discard most of the roll film.[121] Although additional photographs of the early period may resurface in the future, it appears that it was the artist himself who carefully edited the contents of his archive.

Considering that throughout his life Evans assigned a crucial role to the selection and sequencing of his photographs, a plausible question is whether the archive can be seen as a *text* in and of itself. The significance of the photographic repository as an autonomous text has been the subject of scholarly scrutiny over the past thirty years. Historians trained in the appreciation of individual prints have been slow to recognize

119. I derive this opinion from Crane's annotations on the original prints reproduced in Keller, *Walker Evans*, *passim*.

120. On the Crane Collection, see Judith Goldman, "Collecting in Chicago: Love Affairs with Art," *Art News*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (February 1979), pp 48–49; David Travis, *Photography in Chicago Collections* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1982).

121. See for example the series on the Park Row Building in WEA 1994.253.16.1–3.

the relevance of the archive as a critical space, rather than a mere ordering device or an entropic accumulation of images. An important case that suggested a shift of focus from the photographic object to the archive was the collection of Eugène Atget acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, whose order and chronology were reconstructed by Maria Morris Hambourg at the end of the 1970s.[122] For decades the work of Atget – almost entirely unpublished at the time of his death in 1927 and lacking explicit indications by the photographer – was subjected to selective appropriations from Surrealist artists, nostalgic lovers of old Paris, and modernist photographers, until Hambourg's uncovering of the artist's system of classification revealed the thematic and geographical discipline governing thousands of apparently unrelated photographs.

The critical pitfalls of posthumous classification (and re-classification) were emphasized in the early 1980s by Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who offered cogent arguments against the power of the archive to endow historical documents with an exchange value that makes them palatable to the art market.[123] The beneficial effect of this debate has been to single out the archive as a constitutive element in the very definition of documentary photography, in addition to

122. Barbara L. Michaels, "An Introduction to the Dating and Organization of Eugène Atget's Photographs," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (September 1979), pp. 460–68; Maria Morris Hambourg, "Chronological Chart of the Series," in John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. III, *The Ancien Regime* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 181–85. See also Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

123. Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View" *Art Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 311–19; Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," *Parachute*, No. 22 (Summer 1981), pp. 32–37, reprinted in *On The Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 66–83; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugène Atget," *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January-February 1986), pp. 221–27, reprinted in *Photography at the Dock. Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 28–51. Alan Trachtenberg has raised similar issues regarding the photographic archive of the Farm Security Administration: "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in *Documenting America, 1935–1943*, edited by Carl Fleishhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 43–73.

the traditional principles regarding the subject, style, and "approach" adopted by the photographer.[124]

In other words, the significance of a documentary project is often located primarily in the internal logic governing their organization within a series, and less in the style of individual photographs. In Evans's case, the recognition of a coherent scheme has been hindered by the lack of geographical and chronological information accompanying his photographs, as well as by the absence of a systematic catalog. While even a cursory examination of the archive will reveal the insistence of the artist on certain urban themes such as buildings, signs, and people on the street, our knowledge of Evans's symbolic geography is at best superficial. Clark Worswick, speaking in general of the artist as a compulsive collector, has remarked that "Oddly, what people have missed in thinking about Evans is precisely what it was that he photographed."[125]

This kind of preoccupation for the nominal subjects of the photographs is at the core of my investigation. Starting with a certain frustration with the captions normally associated with Evans's photographs – often imprecise and occasionally incorrect – I have set out to identify the urban sites and buildings depicted by the artist in the first years of his career. Locating fragmentary photographs of repetitive windows and rear walls in the changing urbanscape of New York at the end of the 1920s can be a maddening experience. The unruly sameness of the modernist city, so often denounced by critics of the time like Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford, becomes palpable as we look at these photographs and find ourselves unable to immediately grasp where we are. And yet, after the initial feeling of being at a loss, our eyes begin to scan the geometry of the city in search of a revealing detail or a distinctive architectural element.

124. For an early assessment, see Beaumont Newhall, "Documentary Approach to Photography," *Parnassus*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (March 1938), pp. 2–6. Newhall partially revised his opinion in "A Backward Glance at Documentary," in *Observations. Essays on Documentary Photography*, edited by David Featherstone (Carmel, CA: The Friends of Photography, 1984), pp. 1–6.

125. Clark Worswick, in *Walker Evans. The Lost Work* (Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions, 2000), p. 20.

One suspects that Evans was perniciously aware of the sense of disorientation instilled by his New York photographs in the mind of the contemporary viewer and of the future historian. His photographs imply a paradoxical reaction of subjugation and possession. Looking at them, we strongly feel the alienating power of the modern city; *through* them, we begin to interrogate the forms that make up the distinctiveness of each skyscraper. That is, we are asked to apprehend all the specific decisions that comprise an architectural project. In the city of "repetition, with slight variation," historical depth is inscribed in the number of floors and in the width of street frontage, in the presence or absence of decoration, in the precise proportions of a setback façade determined by zoning laws.[126]

At a first level, then, my aim has been to understand the modalities of Evans's visualization of the modern city. The characterization of his early photographs as formal experiments in the tradition of Cubism and Constructivism has been based on the generic recognition that he often adopted an "angular" style.[127] And yet, within this general qualification, it is only by comparing alternative representations of a given subject that it is possible to fully determine the extent and the quality of this formal manipulation. Cross-referencing Evans's images with other photographs, aerial views, architectural plans, insurance maps, and drawings, I have tried to gather a sense of the artist's performative action in the specific urban spaces of New York. Occasionally, series of negatives record the artist's sequential exploration of the scene and reveal his characteristic problem-solving approach: moving forward or sideways by few inches or steps, framing the entire building or a combination of masses, tilting the camera or keeping it straight (figs. 496–501). In some cases, Evans's strategies of inclusion and exclusion were made

126. I borrow the expression in quotes from Sadakichi Hartmann's essay on the principles of Japanese art in Sidney Allan [Sadakichi Hartmann], "Repetition, with Sight Variation," *Camera Work*, No. 1 (January 1903), pp. 30, 33–34, reprinted in *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre. Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers*, edited by Harry W. Lawton and George Knox (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 94–97.

127. Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," p. 27, note 79.

evident by comparing vintage prints with their corresponding negatives (figs. 94–95).

In general, my attitude has been to look at these photographs as "thick descriptions," to borrow a term from Clifford Geertz: that is, as documents of the artist's cumulative process of intellectual construction, rather than as static images to be read in purely iconographic or semiological terms.[128] By so doing, I have attempted to overcome what I see as a limit in the study of urban images, namely the tendency to read them as exercises in style or figures of speech, such as metaphors or allegories. If photographs are by definition "traces" of the world – that is, inasmuch as they are images *of* something – it is a primary task of the cultural historian to recapture the photographer's intellectual wrestling with his or her subject, especially when the scene facing the camera resists immediate description and interpretation, as in the case of the modern city. Or, to borrow the words of American photographer Lewis Baltz,

> if Evans were a modernist he was certainly not a vulgar modernist, that is, with a market-driven claim to the stylistically defined transcendent object. Evans might be considered a modernist in another sense: that his work is, by its nature, a meditation of the conditions of its own existence, and the relativism of that condition, although that position is currently claimed as post-modernist.[129]

Finally, the total sum of these records – at least of the ones preserved in the archive – builds up a cognitive map of modern Manhattan. But again, to suggest that Evans's aim was to photograph New York's "modernity" at the end of the 1920s is to simplify the

128. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30. For an alternative approach, see for example Jean-Marie Floch, *Les formes de l'empreinte. Brandt, Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau, Stieglitz, Strand* (Périgueux: Pierre Fanlac, 1986).

129. Lewis Baltz, "The most American photographer," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 4, 1994, p. 11, reprinted in Id., *Texts* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2013), p. 29.

ramifications of a project that defined itself over the years (without reaching an end), while its nominal subject kept evolving in front of the camera on a daily basis. As we will see, Evans progressively identified specific areas of investigation within Manhattan and in its vicinities, focussing on the Financial District, South Street, 14th Street and Union Square, 42nd Street and the Grand Central Area, Central Park South, Brooklyn, Coney Island, and Gowanus – all areas that were undergoing dramatic change as a consequence of the real estate boom, or either that represented the *genius loci* of traditional New York. He shunned, however, the most obvious iconography celebrating the tall building as the creation of a specific architect or as a technological feat of modernism. Significantly, almost none of the popular skyscrapers of New York's golden age captured his attention: although in 1929 he did devote a substantial number of plates to the construction of the Chrysler Building, there is no record that he ever recorded the Rockefeller Center (begun in 1930), the 102-story Empire State Building (completed in 1931), or even such urban icons of the previous generation as the Flatiron and the Woolworth Buildings.

Evans's visual geography was tendentious. Conceptually, his urban photographs contrive a synthetic image that can be compared to the graphic photo-montages of the time, such as Paul Citroën's *Metropolis* of 1923. In exhibitions and portfolios, however, Evans employed the photographic sequence rather than collage to evoke a city of fragments. Lined up on the wall or in the pages of a magazine, these surrealistic juxtapositions occasionally light the spark of a comment on the paradoxes of modern life. Yet his fragments of New York composed a frustrated narrative, and his exposition remained unassertive and tongue-in-cheek. While thematic groups and interpretive juxtapositions can be recognized, Evans shied away from general explanations of the urban phenomenon. As a whole, these sequences can be read as a performance on the unstable memory of the city – a staged meditation on the individual's place in the chaos of the metropolis and an attempt to carve out a niche of experience in its alienating environment.

CHAPTER TWO

PHOTOGRAPHING NEW YORK CITY AT THE TURN OF THE 1920s

2.1 New York City, May 1927

On May 16, 1927, late in the morning, Walker Evans disembarked from the S.S. Leviathan at Pier 86 on West 46th Street, after thirteen months spent in France as a student and an aspiring writer.[1] During the time he had spent abroad, a new generation of modern tall buildings had seen the light: while the 33-story Graybar Building at 420 Lexington Avenue had recently been inaugurated, the 38-story Fred F. French Building was under completion at Fifth Avenue and 45th Street; two blocks south, the new, 40-story-tall, Lefcourt National Building was about to replace the Temple of Emanu-el.[2] The debate about the future of the metropolis was raging. The May issue of *Forum* magazine carried a letter by Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen that recapitulated a discussion on the skyscraper that had been triggered few months earlier by an interview with Thomas Edison on the future of modern cities.[3] While stressing the emancipatory power of the machine, Edison had shown some concerns about the lack of a scientific approach in the treatment of traffic, noise, and urban management.[4] Months later, Thomas Hastings – the Beaux-Arts architect who had designed the New York Public Library Building with John Carrère – contributed to the discussion defining skyscrapers as "the greatest calamity," a "disease" that imposed a "dismal, forlorn"

1. WEA 1994.250.4 (1). See also Mellow, Walker Evans, pp. 60 ff.
2. "New Peaks Scrape Manhattan Skies," *New York Times*, August 5, 1928, p. 65.
3. Eeliel Saarinen, "The Finnishing Touch," *Forum*, Vol. 77, No. 5 (May 1927), pp. 790–91.
4. Edward Marshall, "Machine-Made Freedom: An Authorized Interview with Thomas A. Edison," *Forum*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (October 1926), pp. 492–97 and "The Scientific City of the Future: An Authorized Interview with Thomas A. Edison," *Forum*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (December 1926), pp. 823–28.

character on residential neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side and that suffocated historic monuments like City Hall under the "monstrous" scale of unregulated growth.[5] According to Hastings, both scientific city planning and the City Beautiful movement were bound to fail in their attempt to give a coherent shape to the modern city through a master plan; only restrictive laws setting limits to the height of new skyscrapers, he claimed, could avoid the pitfalls of ungoverned growth and favor a balanced distribution of urban population. In response to these ideas, Johnny Roosval, a medievalist from the University of Stockholm who had recently visited the United States, spoke positively about the innovations in American architectural design stimulated by tall buildings. Finally, Saarinen proposed his own view, advocating strong measures toward decentralization, "creating by this means impressive complexes of buildings at important points in the town either by planning skyscrapers to stand alone or in groups with good rhythmic interrelations."

An important part of this debate addressed the social psychology of metropolitan life. A month after Evans's arrival, for instance, a sketch of New York's recent and ongoing transformations "under the spell of modernism" was offered by William J. Brede, a real estate broker, in a *New York Times* article entitled "Changing New York Still on the Move." Brede's story started out with Vincent C. Pepe's reconstruction of Washington Square in 1916 and progressed with the Vanderbilts' restyling of Sutton Place, the recent replacement of slaughterhouses and industrial buildings with the residential structures of Tudor City on the East Side, and the rising land values expected from the development of First, Second, Third, and Sixth Avenues. "The man who thought he knew his New York a generation ago – Brede wrote – is coming to a realization of the changing order of things and his mental picture of the city of that time is a confusion of old ideas

5. Thomas Hastings, "Are Skyscrapers an Asset? I – The City of Dreadful Height," *Forum*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (April 1927), pp. 570–74. Hasting's tirade was illustrated with drawings by Edward H. Suydam, showing Park Avenue, The Ritz Tower, the Fred F. French Building and the Paramount Theatre as dark structures towering above the ant-sized citizens populating the bottom of urban canyons.

with the new."[6] But while Brede acknowledged the disorienting effects of this urban upheaval, he remained fundamentally optimistic about the economic prospects of the real estate market and about the powers of adaptation of the urban mind.[7]

In parallel with the official discourse led by magazines and newspapers, new ideas about the relationship between man and machines were being elaborated in New York's artistic and literary circles. On May 16, few hours after Evans's arrival, the Machine-Age Exposition opened in a large storage space at 119 West 57th Street.[8] Organized by Jane Heap of the *Little Review* in collaboration with the Société des Urbanistes of Brussels, the USSR Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), and several European architects, the exhibition presented a wide array of architectural projects, artworks, industrial objects, and mechanical parts.[9] As E. B. White commented in the *New Yorker*, "Drawings, photographs, cubist and constructionist figures by reputable modern artists are side by side with cogs, motor boat propellers, Crane valves, insides of pianos and diving suits."[10] A substantial portion of the exhibition (as well as the entire catalog, published as a special issue of the *Little Review*) was devoted

6. W[illiam] J. Brede, "Changing New York Still on the Move," *New York Times*, June 19, 1927, p. RE17.

7. Brede's view was in tune with several articles published by the *New York Times* during this period, expressing a deep sense of nostalgia for the disappearing city. See, for example, H[enry] I. Brock, "Landmarks Today, They Pass Tomorrow," *New York Times*, November 18, 1928, p. SM6; "Recalls Changes on 42nd Street," *New York Times*, January 4, 1931, p. RE15.

8. Susan Noyes Platt, "Mysticism in the Machine Age: Jane Heap and the *Little Review*," *Twenty/One*, No. 1 (Fall 1989), pp. 18–44.

9. The exhibition was supported by an artists' committee formed by Alexander Archipenko, Robert W. Chanler, Andrew Dasburg, Charles Demuth, Muriel Draper, Marcel Duchamp, Josef Frank, Hugh Ferriss, Louis Lozowick, André Lurçat, Elie Nadelman, Man Ray, Boardman Robinson, Charles Sheeler, Ralph Steiner, Szymon Syrkus, and Louis van der Swalmen: *Machine-Age Exposition,* edited by Jane Heap (New York: The Little Review, 1927).

10. E. B. White, *The Talk of the Town*, "Machine Age," *New Yorker*, Vol. 3, No. 118 (May 21, 1927), p. 13.

specifically to modern architecture, presenting new buildings and city plans from the United States, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, Russia.[11]

Sketching the exhibition project in 1925, Jane Heap had called for an "affiliation of Artist and Engineer" that could catalyze their "plastic-mechanic analogy," not in order to worship the age of the machine, but as a way to educate the general public to see its beauty.[12] Heap's ideas on the role of the artist in modern society had been preceded by a talk by Fernand Léger translated in the *Little Review* in 1923, in which he praised "Machine Beauty, without artistic intention [...] the architecture of machinery."[13] Louis Lozowick, in an oft-cited essay on "The Americanization of Art" included in the exhibition catalogue, wrote enthusiastically of "the intriguing novelty, the crude virility, the stupendous magnitude" of the new urbanscape.[14] In keeping with Heap's ideas, Lozowick claimed that it was the artist's duty to discern and sift off the fundamental principles of a mechanical art from "all the apparent chaos and confusion" of the present situation. These principles, he continued, were to be found "in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks."

In addition to architecture and engineering, the catalogue of the Machine-Age Exposition listed sculptures by Gaston Lachaise, Elie Nadelman, John Storrs, Alexander Archipenko, Naum Gabo, Jacques Lipchitz; works by Man Ray, Theo Van Doesburg, Hans Arp; drawings by Hugh Ferriss and "machine ornaments" by Lozowick; two paintings by Charles Demuth (*Business*, 1921 and *From the Garden of the Château*, 1921–1925) (figs. 107, 105); photographs by Ralph Steiner and aerial views by Fairchild

11. "New Architecture Develops in Russia," *New York Times*, May 29, 1927, p. E1.

12. Jane Heap, "Machine-Age Exposition," *The Little Review,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 1925), pp. 22–24.

13. Fernand Léger, "The Esthetics of the Machine: Manufactured Objects Artisan and Artist," *The Little Review,* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring 1923), pp. 45–49 (quotation p. 46) and Vol. 9, No. 4 (Autumn-Winter 1923–1924), pp. 55–58.

14. Louis Lozowick, "The Americanization of Art," *Machine-Age Exposition*, pp. 18–19.

Aerial Service.[15] Overall, the exhibition was meant to offer a perspective on the rejuvenation of American culture made possible by the contamination of art, architecture, and technology. Reviewing the exhibition in *The Arts*, Herbert Lippmann wrote that this goal had been achieved only in part, but praised two of Steiner's photographs, which "although static can look more dynamic than machinery itself when stationary."[16]

The consequences of technological advancement debated by artists and critics revolving around the *Little Review* were already transforming everyday life and the social imagination. On May 20, four days after Evans's return, Lieutenant Charles A. Lindbergh took off from Long Island on the Spirit of St. Louis for a record-setting transatlantic trip that ended in Paris the following day, after 33 and ½ hours of uninterrupted flight. On June 13, 1927, New York paid tribute to Lindbergh with a memorable ticker-tape parade – the largest ever held in the city – attended by almost 4,000,000 people. As Leonard Reich has observed, after this heroic feat Lindbergh was sanctified as "the personification of American technological triumph," a living icon combining the individualism of the early settlers and the promises of the machine age.[17]

It is of some significance that Evans's earliest surviving photographs of New York were made on that day. Two similar images taken with a hand-held camera show rows of soldiers and policemen waiting for the parade to start on Whitehall and Beaver Streets, the pavement blanketed with confetti and shredded paper (figs. 120, 123). All the photographs of Evans's European trip of 1926–1927 were snapshots taken by an amateur photographer with no apparent interest in the language of the medium, with the possible exception of a series of self-portraits in silhouette possibly mimicking the

15. In the exhibition catalogue, Demuth's painting *From the Garden of the Château* was listed as *From the Window of the Chateau*.

16. Herbert Lippmann, "The Machine-Age Exposition," *The Arts*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (June 1927), p. 325.

17. Leonard S. Reich, "From the Spirit of St. Louis to the SST: Charles. Lindbergh, Technology, and Environment," *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 1995), pp. 351–93. See also "Pictures Rushed by Plane and Train," *New York Times*, June 12, 1927, p. 16.

fashionable "ghost" photographs of the time.[18] Considering the low technical quality of the two snapshots of the Lindbergh Parade and the fact that Evans was still experimenting with literature when he returned from Europe in 1927, it is unlikely that these isolated photographs of the Lindbergh Parade were made with the same focus that we have seen in the series taken from the Brooklyn Bridge of October 1928. Two variant prints in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, however, suggest that at a later moment Evans reconsidered these snapshots with particular interest. Printing the negative of the Whitehall Street scene, he cropped the original framing to direct the attention to the soldiers' uniforms, eliding the men's heads in the foreground and emphasizing the repetition of their V-shaped cross belts; except for the street pavement littered with confetti, the city was completely cancelled from the view (fig. 123). A sister photograph, taken on Beaver Street, shows a squadron of policemen seen again from behind, their backs turned toward the camera forming a wall of dark uniforms, with the exception of a bespectacled policemen looking toward the photographer (fig. 120). In this case the city was clearly visible in the background, an uninterrupted screen of tall buildings and commercial signs on Beaver Street with theatrical wing of the Cunard Building closing the scene in the distance.

Despite its occasional character, Evans's representation of the parade was singularly at odds with the official image of the event. The following day, the first page of the *New York Times* carried a Times Wide World photograph of the aviator "as the city saw him," smiling at the throngs of New Yorkers lined up on the sidewalks as he advanced with the parade, surrounded by policemen on foot and on horse-back – the exact opposite of Evans's iconography.[19] Other pictures of the day recorded the authorities and

18. Compare, for example, WEA 1994.251.13–15 and "A Page of Actorplasms: Shadows Along Broadway Photographed for *Vanity Fair* by Conan Doyle, Jr.," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (July 1923), p. 50.

19. "As the City Saw Him," *New York Times*, June 14, 1927, p. 1; see also "City Vast Gallery of 'Lindy' Pictures," ibid., p. 9.

the military troops that accompanied the pageant, including an official view of the "New York's Seventh Regiment in Its New Uniforms" that Evans also photographed from the rear.[20]

That he chose to distance himself from the most sensational scenes of cheering crowds was perhaps the sign of his aversion "to all such ideas as come from the mob, and are polluted by its stupidity: Puritanism, Prohibition, Comstockery, evangelical Christianity, tin-pot patriotism, the whole sham of democracy."[21] One could think that Evans, having just returned from a rather fruitless year in Paris, saw the city's tribute to Lindbergh (one year his senior) and the general enthusiasm for his transatlantic flight with some annoyance, if not resentment.

As a young writer bitterly critical of mainstream America ("I was anti-American at the time," he recalled late in his life), he may have sympathized with the dreamy experience of the metropolis narrated by Sherwood Anderson in a short story published in *Vanity Fair* in July 1927.[22] A "wide-eyed countryman," Anderson's character returned to visit New York to discover a city of "Money. Beauty. Power," in which the average life of skyscrapers had shortened to nine years. Although he expressed "a kind of faith" in the builders of the metropolis and saw architecture as the democratic art of the future, he also perceived the destructive power of relentless change and fantasized about buildings growing abnormally, losing their stability, crashing to the ground causing fear and death: "I mutter to myself words 'New York is imperialistic, brutal. It shall

20. "Scenes When the City Welcomed Its Air Hero Back," ibid., p. 5.

21. The quotation is from Henry L. Mencken, *A Personal Word*, pamphlet on *The Smart Set* (New York, 1922), p. 6, quoted in Morris Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," p. 4.

22. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 84. Early in his career, Evans presented himself as a cosmopolitan artist with a European education: a biographical note accompanying one of Evans's first publications recited: "He has been in Europe where he has studied modern Continental methods": "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1930), p. 454. See also above, p. 8.

make a brutal imperialistic race.'"[23] New York's definitive disenfranchisement from its European origins, according to Anderson's protagonist, was an accomplished fact, but in the distant future the "center of all western things" would drift further west, toward Chicago and its prairies.

2.2 Urban illustrations

Anderson's story was illustrated with a woodcut by Frans Masereel, "a vivid, impressionistic, kaleidoscopic interpretation of a great city and its daily life" by a Belgian artist who had never visited New York.[24] In the 1920s, the debate on New York's modern architecture continued to be largely illustrated by the same draftsmen and illustrators that had shaped the image of the city during the previous decade. While photography was a relatively efficient medium when it came to monumentalize new structures emerging from the urban skyline, drawings were favored by architects for their ability to convey synthetic representations of the city and to render future developments in the urban landscape.[25] For a long period since the emergence of the tall building in the early 20th century, drawings and etchings also played a significant role in the familiarization of urban dwellers with the new aesthetic of the metropolis. Artists like Joseph Pennell, for example, tended to represent the skyscraper as an imposing mass enveloped

23. Sherwood Anderson, "New York: A Novelist of the People Interprets a Great American City and Its Life and Illusions," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (July 1927), pp. 33, 94, reprinted as "New York, the '20s," in *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942), pp. 328–32.

24. Masereel's illustration, probably drawn after a photograph of the Second Avenue El at Coenties Slip, was reprinted from his book *Die Stadt. 100 Holzschnitte* (München: Karl Wolff Verlag, 1925).

25. See, for example, Kineton Parkes, "A Master of Architectural Etching – Sidney Tushingham," *Pencil Points,* Vol. 10, No. 9 (September 1929), pp. 591 ff.; Francis S. Swales, "Vernon Howe Bailey, Delineator of Architecture," *Pencil Points*, Vol. 11, No. 12 (December 1930), pp. 935–52; Max Feldman, "A Sketcher Looks at New York," ibid., pp. 977–82.

in a dramatic light; using traditional drawing techniques to soften the contours of the buildings, he romanticized the growing metropolis and created an aesthetic continuum with the Beaux Arts tradition. Coherently, Pennell's classical approach led him to express his deep dissatisfaction for the modern city's "utter lack of art, of design," and to dismiss photography as a mere recording medium, incapable of grasping the soul of the city.[26] As he asked rhetorically in 1897, "As to the photographing of old buildings, which would the architect have, an etching by Piranesi or a photograph by one of the most revolutionary of the 'Salon' photographers?"[27]

A further consequence of the use of non-mechanical media in the representation of New York was the view of the skyscraper as a work of art. In 1926, this theme was at the center of an exhibition organized by the British architect Alfred C. Bossom at the International Art Center in New York, which gave ample space to Hugh Ferriss's drawings.[28] A professional draftsman who worked on commission for New York's finest architectural firms, Ferriss was the leading figure in the romanticization of the futuristic city. As early as 1921, architectural critic C. Matlack Price praised his ability to transfigure the common perception of the city and to educate the citizens' eye: "To appreciate the pictorial quality that a building may possess, look at it on a misty day or at twilight, so that you can see it devoid of distincting details."[29] Ferriss was among the organizers of the Machine-Age Exposition, contributing a foreword to the exhibi-

26. Joseph Pennell, "An Artist Looks at Our Architecture," *New York Times Magazine*, October 18, 1925, pp. 7, 22.

27. Joseph Pennell, "Is Photography among the Fine Arts?," *The Contemporary Review*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (December 1897), pp. 824–36, quotation p. 833.

28. "Skyscraper City of Future Shown," *New York Times,* December 2, 1926, p. 29. In 1934, Bossom published *Building to the Skies. The Romance of the Skyscraper* (London: Studio Limited; New York: Studio Publications, 1934), a book that located the origins of the new architecture in the ziggurats of Old Mexico. For a precedent, see Francisco Mujica, *History of the Skyscraper* (Paris: Archaeology & Architecture Press, 1929).

29. C. Matlack Price, "The Trend of Architectural Thought in America," with drawings by Hugh Ferriss, *The Century Magazine*, Vol. 102, No. 5 (September 1921), pp. 709–22.

tion catalog in which he outlined the importance of the 1916 Zoning Resolution for the emergence of a new generation of American buildings. Calling for innovations in design that could overcome "the pleasant security of forms already matured by others," he cited as positive examples Harvey Wiley Corbett's Bush Tower (1916–1918), Eliel Saarinen's entry for the Chicago Tribune (1922), Raymond Hood's Radiator Building (1923–1924), and Arthur Loomis Harmon's Shelton Hotel (1924).[30] As a professional draftsman Ferriss had illustrated many of these new buildings, working with architectural drawings and photographs to develop dramatic images that privileged the structure's sculptural mass at the expense of analytical detail.[31] In order to achieve this effect, Ferriss often staged his subjects in a nocturnal environment illuminated by artificial lights, relying on chiaroscuro and on a futuristic aerial perspective to delineate the mass of individual buildings and the fabric of the city surrounding them. In his most accomplished visual statement, *The Metropolis of To-morrow*, published in 1929, Ferriss integrated the rationalism of the zoning law (in terms of mass and geometry) and the soft-focus pictorialism of the previous generation (in terms of surface and light).[32] This atmospheric effect implied a powerful symbolic meaning. Influenced by the philosophy of George Gurdjeff, he believed in the spiritual role of technology and architecture, echoing similar ideas developed in Futurist circles that celebrated the mysticism of the machine.[33] The light that permeaed Ferriss's drawings was meant as the revelation of a world in the making rather than a tool for describing the actual city. As he wrote in the

30. *Machine-Age Exposition*, p. 6.

31. Hugh Ferriss, "How Hugh Ferriss Draws: Six Progressive Stages in Rendering a Proposed Building," *American Architect*, Vol. 140, No. 2597 (July 1931), pp. 30–33.

32. Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of To-morrow* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1929). See Kevin R. McNamara, *Urban Verbs. Arts and Discourses of American Cities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 93–136. On Ferriss, see Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City," p. 481.

33. Susan Platt Noyes has defined Ferriss an "American Gurdjieffian": see "Mysticism in the Machine Age," p. 37.

introduction to the book's third and final section, titled "An Imaginary Metropolis," "It is again dawn, with an early mist completely enveloping the scene. Again, there lies beneath us, curtained by the mist, a Metropolis – and the curtain, again, is about to rise."[34]

Although *The Metropolis of To-morrow* was generally well received among New York architectural circles, Henry-Russell Hitchcock dismissed Ferriss's "geometrical dreams" for their lack of connection with the viewpoint of the observer.[35] In the 1930s Ferriss continued to work with city planners, including the Regional Planning Association of America, which hired him as a consulting architect for the Regional Plan of New York published in 1930.[36] In the long run, the futuristic imagery and the nocturnal settings of *The Metropolis of To-morrow* placed it alongside Expressionist cinema and the emerging film noir, but with the onset of the Depression the book failed to exert a significant role in the iconography of New York.

During the 1920s, however, illustrations of the modern city progressively shifted toward a more austere style, often influenced by immigrant artists who had experienced the urbanscape of post-war Europe before moving to New York. The romantic atmospheres so often found in a magazine like *Pencil Point*, which privileged pastels, crayons, and watercolors, gave way to the stern design of woodcuts, linoleum cuts, wood engravings, lithographs.[37] Attempts to dress the modern city in the proper garb of academic drawing were still in place in the late 1920s, as in *The Towers of Manhattan*,

34. Ferriss, *The Metropolis of To-morrow*, p. 109.

35. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1929), p. 202. See also Frederick J. Woodbridge, "The City of the Future," *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 31 (February 22, 1930), p. 752.

36. See "Examples of the Recent Work of Hugh Ferriss,", *Creative Art*, Vol. 9, No. 2, *New York of the Future* (August 1931), pp. 154 ff.

37. See, for example, *American Prints, 1900–1950: An Exhibition in Honor of the Donation of John P. Axelrod B.A. 1968*, edited by Richard S. Field et al. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1983), pp. 31–43, 53–64.

a 1928 book published by the New York Edison Company with illustrations by Peter Suydam, or *New York Is Like This*, written by H. I. Brock and illustrated by Joseph Golinkin.[38] A radical change occurred at the end of the decade with artists like Howard Cook, Frans Masereel, Louis Lozowick, Adriaan Lubbers, Arnold Rönnebeck, Martin Lewis, to name a few, who often depicted the urbanscape of New York placing particular attention on social and political issues, especially after the onset of the Depression. Dismissing the detached, academic stance of the previous generation, younger artists explored the city with a special sympathy for human life and a keen eye for revealing details, often bringing significant innovations to the iconography of New York. This new awareness of the problematic task of translating the experience of the modern city – as opposed to merely reproducing its visual stereotypes – can be perceived, for example, in *Woodcuts of New York*, a 1938 book by Hans Alexander Mueller. He wrote:

> I tread the asphalt, cement and stone of New York for the first time, but with no set purpose to know all about the city in five days' time. Mine is a search without a program [...] using my five senses, I take stock of my surroundings [...] and so experience the vibration of the new city though many trifles, each of which has a kind of skyscraper significance for me.[39]

By the mid-1920s, innovations in the graphic design of art and architectural magazines induced a parallel shift from hand-made illustrations to "straight" photographs, both as illustrations of critical texts and as autonomous visual essays. The unflinching

38. *Towers of Manhattan* (New York: The New York Edison Company, 1928); Henry Irving Brock and Joseph W. Golinkin, *New York Is Like This* (Neew York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1929).

39. Hans Alexander Mueller, *Woodcuts of New York* (New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1938), p. vi. For an overview on politically-oriented artists working in this medium, see Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 13–15.

eye of modern photography, consonant with the architects' stress on technology, functionalism, and exactness, was increasingly recognized as the quintessential medium for representing the age of the machine. Beginning with the issue of January 1928, *Architectural Record* adopted the larger, standardized 8 ½ × 11 in. format and a new layout designed by Frederic W. Goudy; in the same number, an entire section titled "Portfolio of Current Architecture" was devoted to sixteen photographs of New York City buildings by Sigurd Fischer.[40] In 1929, an article in *The Architectural Forum* admonished: "Pictorial effects have no place in the photograph that's intended to become part of a permanent record of structural facts. […] Detail is what we are after – all of it that can be secured, with identity and relationships of elements made clear and brought out needle-sharp."[41]

In accord with these principles, photographers like Sigurd Fischer, Margaret Bourke-White, Ewing Galloway, Samuel H. Gottscho, Ira W. Martin, and Eugene de Salignac, to name a few, specialized in the representation of modern buildings – notably skyscrapers and industrial structures – for architectural firms, city departments, real estate investors, publishing houses, and advertising agencies. While their pictures did not necessarily chronicle all the phases of construction, by exalting monumental façades, engineering details, and the decorative elements of new skyscrapers, they were often crucial in shaping the image of modern architecture. The medium's transformative role and the tendency toward the aestheticisation of the architectural object did not go unnoticed among critics. Reviewing the annual exhibition of the Architectural League in

40. Michael A. Mikkelson, "A Word about the New Format," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 1928), p. 1; "Views of New York City by Sigurd Fischer," pp. 18–47. The magazine partially switched to sans-serif fonts in 1930. The key figure behind the rejuvenation of *Architectural Record* was A. Lawrence Kocher, who became managing editor in 1928: Hyungmin Pai, *The Portfolio and the Diagram. Architecture, Discourse, and Modernity in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 148 ff.

41. Leicester K. Davis, "Photo-Visualizing for Architects," *The Architectural Forum,* Vol. 51, No. 1 (July 1929), p. 105.

1928, Harold Sterner advanced a pointed critique of the representation of architecture through models, drawings, and pictures, raising doubts about the use of photographic enlargements apparently designed to catch the viewer's attention and appease the eye: "The hanging committee has, however, not been entirely immune to the appeal of good photography and several examples of distinctly poor work have been given prominence, apparently on the merits of the camera man alone."[42]

Those who saw photography as a mere recording device never lost their distrust of the medium, and could not acknowledge its ability to interpret the factors of change or the true nature of the modern metropolis. As an art critic commented in passing about painter John Marin in 1934, "He is one of the few American artists who can paint skyscrapers without making them look either like dolls' houses or photographs like Margaret Bourke-White. Buildings to Marin are not just sprouting masses of brick and stone, but greater forces pulling against lesser forces."[43] A certain degree of evolution, however, occurred even among professional photographers, especially when they managed to incorporate the point of view of ordinary city-dwellers in their stereometric records of tall buildings. Looking up from the bottom of an urban canyon or staring down from an office window, or including fragments of contemporary life unforeseen by the designers of the skyscraper, they articulated a dialectic of uncanniness and domestication that found similar expressions in painting and literature of the time.[44]

42. Harold Sterner, "The Architectural League," *The Arts*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (March 1928), p. 185.

43. E[manuel] M. Benson, "The American Scene," *The American Magazine of Art*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (February 1934), pp. 53–66.

44. No comprehensive study has yet been undertaken on the role played by commercial photographers in the evolution of New York's iconography of the 1920s. For individual monographs, see *Margaret Bourke-White. The Early Work, 1922–1930*, selected, with an essay by Ronald Elroy Ostman and Harry Littell (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005); Donald Albrecht, *The Mythic City. Photographs of New York by Samuel H. Gottscho, 1925–1940* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005); and *New York Rises. Photographs by Eugene de Salignac*, essays by Michael Lorenzini and Kevin Moore (New York: Aperture, 2007).

In the 1920s, another dramatic innovation in the iconography of modern cities was introduced by aerial images.[45] After the end of the First World War, former military pilots often contributed to the popularization of airplane photography, both as a tool for land interpretation and a source of picturesque imagery. In 1918, Captain Alfred G. Buckham – a former reconnaissance photographer of the Royal Naval Air Service – began to depict world cities and geographical settings from the sky, often devoting a significant portion of his pictures to spectacular cloud formations, reminiscent of 17th-century Dutch landscape paintings.[46] Within a few years, oblique photographs conveying uncanny perspectives on the American geography became a genre in and of itself: in 1924–1925, for instance, Lieutenants Albert W. Stevens and John A. Macready flew repeatedly across the United States, taking 3,600 photographs for the Department of the Interior in cooperation with the National Park Service.[47]

By decade's end, following Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, newspapers and popular magazines began to shape a new aesthetic of cities and landscapes observed from the perspective of the air traveller. In 1928, an article by Henry I. Brock reported to the readers of the *New York Times Magazine* his impressions of Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs that he had recorded on a flight with aviator Casey Jones. Brock's alternative geography presented Greater New York as a patchwork of urban fabrics

45. Beaumont Newhall, *Airborne Camera. The World from the Air and Outer Space* (New York, Hastings House, 1969).

46. Five photographs by Buckham, including views of London and Edinburgh, were published in *Fortune*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 1930), pp. 75–79. An extended series on the geography of South America commissioned by Henry Luce was published the following year: "Southward Bound," *Fortune*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September 1931), pp. 72–85. For a recent study, see Celia Ferguson, *A Vision of Flight. The Aerial Photography of Alfred G. Buckham* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2007).

47. John A. Macready, "The Non-Stop Flight Across America," *National Geographic Magazine*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (July 1924), pp. 1–93, with photographs by Albert W. Stevens; "Fly 20,000 Miles in 200 Hours," *New York Times*, October 6, 1925, p. 2. See also Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight Patterns. Trends of Aeronautical Development in the United States, 1918–1929* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 156–57.

that varied according to thickness, pattern, and color. The aim of the experiment, the author claimed, was "to inquire whether the architecture which satisfies the view from its own windows or from Central Park, or from the harbor, or from the Jersey shore, still satisfies when it is looked down on, in spite of having [been] built by people who thought of it always as something to be looked up at."[48]

It is significant that Brock's article was largely illustrated with photographs by Fairchild Aerial Surveys, Inc., the leading company in the field of urban aerial photography, established by Sherman M. Fairchild in 1924. Photography's potential as a substitute for traditional survey maps had been a matter of discussion since the end of the previous decade. Reviewing the state of the art in 1919, Herbert Ives remarked: "A complete map of a large city is a labor of years. In fact, a modern city is always dangerously near to growing faster than its maps. An aerial map, on the contrary, can be produced in few hours."[49] Fairchild had established himself as an innovator in both camera and airplane technology before he set out to compose a promotional "Manhattan Mosaic" in 1921, comprising 100 photographs which covered an area of 32 square miles.[50] The success of this initial experiment led to an appointment by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of the City of New York for a systematic survey and, in 1924, to a larger project encompassing the metropolitan area of Greater New York.

48. H[enry] I. Brock, "The City That the Air Traveler Sees," *New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 1928, pp 14–15, 27. See also Kent Sagendorph, "Looking Down on the World," *World's Work*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (January 1931), pp. 72–77.

49. Herbert E. Ives, *Airplane Photography* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1920), pp. 406–7. Ives (1882–1953) was trained as a physicist and specialized in color photography. Since 1919, when he joined the AT&T research division, he was in the forefront in the development of long-distance television.

50. "Airplane Camera Maps Entire City Clearly in 69 Minutes, Flying 10,000 Feet High," *New York Times*, February 26, 1922, Section 2, p. 1; "Practical Uses of Aerial Photography. Fairchild Camera Produces Remarkable Aerial Map of New York City," *Aviation*, Vol. 12, No. 15 (April 10, 1922), pp. 424–26. A brief history of Fairchild's company is in Thomas J. Campanella, *Cities from the Sky. An Aerial Portrait of America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), pp. 8–13, 123–25.

Based on 2,000 photographs which required 3,000 miles of flying, the final map controlled a territory of 625 square miles and measured 30 × 27 feet.[51]

Another important way of approaching the many facets of the modern city was through photographic books. Illustrated monographs and photographic portfolios addressing urban themes had been available since the end of the 19th century (one need only think of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, published in book form in 1890, or Alfred Stieglitz's series *Picturesque Bits of New York and Other Studies* of 1897), but it was only in the second half of the 1920s that innovations in the printing industry and, arguably, the development of a new ability to "read" visual texts made it possibile to conceive books on the city based almost exclusively on photographic sequences. Among those that Evans may have encountered after his return from Paris, we can consider Ben J. Lubschez's *Manhattan: The Magical Island* and Emil Otto Hoppé's *Romantic America,* both published by in 1927.[52]

Lubschez's work is practically unrecognized despite his original contributions to the development of urban and architectural photography. Born in Odessa in 1881, he emigrated to Kansas City with his family at the age of three, where he became a practising architect with the firm of Adriance Van Brunt before he opened his own studio in 1913. and was elected President of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.[53]

51. Sherman M. Fairchild, "Aerial Mapping of New York City," *American City*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January 1924), pp. 74–75; "The Making of Greater New York's Air Map," *Aviation*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 1924), pp. 16–17; "Map-Making by Airplane Becomes Useful Business," *New York Times*, May 3, 1925, Section 8, p. 16. See also Jennifer S. Light, *From Warfare to Welfare. Defense Intellectuals and Urban Problems in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 131–34.

52. Ben J. Lubschez, *Manhattan: The Magical Island* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1927); Emil O. Hoppé, *Romantic America. Picturesque United States* (New York: B. Westermann Co., Inc., 1927).

53. *Ad vocem*, in *Macmillan Biographical Encyclopedia of Photographic Artists & Innovators,* edited by Turner Browne and Elaine Partnow (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1983), p. 376. See also Clarence I. Freed, "Master of Camera Art Whose Lens Has Caught the Spirit of Manhattan In All Its

In 1918 he moved to New York, where he worked for Harold Van Buren Magonigle, the architect of the Maine Memorial on Columbus Circle and joined the Ethical Culture Society. A prolific writer, Lubschez published books on drawing, perspective and cinema before devoting himself to photography.[54] His photographs began to appear in exhibitions and publications in the mid-1910s, with portfolios on New York, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and Southern architecture presented in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects,* as well as individual entries in the 1921 and 1922 editions of *Pictorial Photography in America*.[55] By this time, Lubschez's authority in the field was publicly recognized, as testified by a substantial article on the making of exhibition prints that he published in 1922 in the photographic magazine *Photo Miniature*.[56]

In his second book on drawing, published in 1918, Lubschez included a brief chapter on the usefulness of photography for draftsmen and architectural students, making a clear distinction between "record" and "pictorial" pictures based on the opposition between descriptive and tonal values in the final print. In the introduction of *Manhattan:*

Wondrous Beauty," *American Hebrew and Jewish Tribune*, Vol. 121, No. 14 (August 12, 1927), pp. 459, 466; A.L.M.K, "Manhattan Through a Camera," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, Vol. 15, No. 7 (July 1927), p. 242.

54. Ben J. Lubschez, *Perspective: An Elementary Text Book* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1913); *Over the Drafting Board: A Draftsman's Hand Book* (Washington, DC: The Journal fo the American Institute of Architects and The Octagon, 1918); *The Story of the Motion Picture, 65 B.C. to 1920 A.D.* (New York: Reeland Publishing Co., 1920). In 1928, he collaborated with Frances Benjamin Johnston to illustrate a survey book onSamuel Gaillard Stoney, Samuel Lapham, Albert Simons, *Plantations of the Carolina Low Country* (Charleston, SC: Carolina Art Association, 1938).

55. See the portfolio "Nine Photographs by Ben J. Lubschez," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (September 1915), following p. 381, still influenced by Alvin Langdon Coburn, the interesting photographs of the construction of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1916), following p. 108, and his regular contributions to the same journal published in the following years. See also *Sunbeams*, in *Pictorial Photography of America 1921* (New York: Pictorial Photographers of America, 1921), p. 49 and *Sixth Avenue, New York City*, in *Pictorial Photography of America 1922* (New York: Pictorial Photographers of America, 1922), p. 88.

56. Ben J. Lubschez, "The Exhibition Print," *Photo Miniature*, Vol. 16, No. 188 (September-November 1922), pp. 357–80. Subsequently, Lubschez became the magazine co-editor.

The Magical Island he seemed to advocate a more descriptive approach when he wrote: "with the camera there is little chance to succumb to the temptation of embellishing realities with a beauty or picturesqueness which does not exist in fact."[57] In fact, his own photographs mixed elements of the documentary tradition – wide angle lens, strong descriptive light, short exposure times – with a careful balancing of tonal areas and a certain degree of softness typical of the post-pictorial style in vogue in the 1920s (fig. 76).

Individually, Lubschez's photographs were appreciated by architectural critics like Fiske Kimball and Lewis Mumford, who reproduced them in their books to illustrate their histories of American building culture.[58] But it is in the sequence of 107 photographs comprising *Manhattan: The Magical Island* that we can see how specific questions on the modern city explored through individual photographs taken over the years coalesced into an organic representation of New York. The book illustrated most of the city's neighborhoods, from "the billion-dollar skyline" of the Wall Street to "fashionable Murray Hill [...] bravely fighting to maintain its identity," northward to Harlem and Washington Heights, showing an urbanscape bustling with activity but apparently untouched by the economic and social contradictions narrated in contemporary books, such as John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). That these contradictions formed the subtext of the book is implied by Lubschez's remark about "progress, the destroyer" and by his suggestion that it was in the city's parks, "bits of green slowly being stifled by the monster," that New Yorkers could still find respite from the nuisances of everyday life.[59] Accordingly, the photographic sequence began with picturesque views along the East River marred by the signs of modernity – the massive profile of the Barclay-Vesey Building on West Street competing with the slender shaft of the Woolwhorth Building,

57. Lubschez, *Manhattan: The Magical Island*, p. 3.

58. See Fiske Kimball, *American Architecture* (Indianapolis and New York: The Boobs-Merrill Co., 1928), following pp. 182 and 204; Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865–1895* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1931), following p. 36.

59. Ibid., p. 7.

a puff of black smoke from a tugboat juxtaposed to the raised arm of the Statue of Liberty – and ended with the soothing atmospheres of the Hudson River, with the ubiquitous tenement eyeing in the distance across the sweeping arch of the Washington Bridge.

Emil Otto Hoppé was a commercial photographer based in London who became renowned for his portraits before he began to work internationally in the fields of urban and landscape photography.[60] *Romantic America,* the outcome of a commissioned work for the Orbis Terrarum series initiated in 1922 by Berlin publisher Ernst Wasmuth, was a visual journey across the United States that began in New York and ended in California. Similarly to Lubschez, Hoppé adopted a descriptive language that was particularly suitable to the semantic density of the modern environment, although he was reluctant to embrace the sleek, polished, and mobile style of the New Vision (fig. 6).[61] A sophisticated treatment of light and vantage point allowed him to create bold, but persuasive compositions that clarified the connections among the basic elements of the urban environment – buildings, streets, infrastructures, human figures – without losing its complexity and depth. [...]

It it is difficult to assess whether Hoppé's visual themes and his use of long lenses to compress the effect of perspective, as it has been argued, influenced Evans's work of the mid-1930s (perhaps a more consistent development of his style and choice of subject matter can be seen in Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*, the decade-long project

60. Sally-Ann Baggott and Brian Stokoe, "The Sucecss of a Photographer: Culture, Commerce, and Ideology in the Work of E. O. Hoppé," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2003), pp. 23–46; Brian Stokoe, "The Exemplary Career of E. O. Hoppé: Photography, Modernism and Modernity," *History of Photography*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (February 2014), pp. 73–93.

61. It is possible that Hoppé saw Lubschez's work before travelling across the United States in 1925–1926: compare, for example, Hoppé's *Radiator Building* and *View Toward the East River from a Park Avenue Building* (in *Romantic America*) with Lubschez's *The Great Lantern, Bryant Park* and *Eastern Edge of Manhattan* (pls. 63 and 76 in *Manhattan: A Magical Island*), the latter exhibited at the Second International Salon of Pictorial Photography in 1925.

published in book form in 1939).[62] Despite their innovative use of the photographic sequence as a form of urban exploration and as an antidote to literary stereotypes, books like *Manhattan: The Magical Island* and *Romantic America* remained entrenched in the tradition of "city portraits" based on the assumption of an organic urban order. Around that time, it was probably another German book that attracted Evans's attention for its criticism of the factors that were shaping the experience of American cities and for its cunning juxtaposition of images and texts. Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, first published in 1926, was an essay on the characters of the American urbanscape compiled by one of Europe's most prominent architects, known for his design of the Einstein Tower in Potsdam and for several projects of commercial and industrial buildings.[63] Its title notwithstanding, Mendelsohn's book was not the portrait of a nation, but a selective analysis of its major cities – including New York City, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, and Taliesin (where he met with Frank Lloyd

62. See Philip Prodger, *E. O. Hoppé's Amerika: Modernist Photographs from the 1920s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007) and Mick Gidley, "Silence, Grandeur: Emil Otto Hoppé's Popular American Landscapes," in *Modern American Landscapes* (European Contributions to American Studies, n. 26), edited by Gidley, Mick and Lawson-Peebles, Robert (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), pp. 151–71.

63. Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1926). Here and in the following pages I will refer to the expanded 1928 edition, which presented a different photographic sequence and slightly different texts; it also carried a list of photographic credits, acknowledging the contribution of architect-photographer Knud Lönberg-Holm, Mendelsohn's assistant Erich Karweik (who had travelled to the United States in 1927) and, in one instance, of film director Fritz Lang: for an assessment, see Jean-Louis Cohen, "The Moderns Discover America: Mendelsohn, Neutra, and Maiakovsky," in *Scenes of the World to Come. European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893–1960* (Paris: Flammarion; Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1995), pp. 85–103 and "Postface," in *Erich Mendelsohn Amerika. Livre d'images d'un architecte* trans. Marianne Brausch (Paris: Les édition du Demi Cercle, 1992), pp. 225–40. The current American edition – *Erich Mendelsohn's Amerika,* trans. Stanley Applebaum (New York: Dover, 1993) – is based on the 1926 edition, but includes 82 instead of the original 77 photographs.

Wright and Richard Neutra) – that he had visited between October and November 1924.

The 77 photographs of the original edition were increased to 100 two years later, and it is likely this second edition that Evans had a chance not only to see, but also to read, with the help of one of his German friends in New York, most probably the architect Paul Grotz. Using a small, hand-held camera, Mendelsohn explored the American city recording the cumulative effects produced by the unplanned growth of tenements, skyscrapers, billboards, and grain elevators. It is telling that Alexander Rodchenko, who is generally credited with inventing the "angular" style in the mid-1920s, presented Mendelsohn's American photographs as successful examples of the New Vision in a 1928 article in *Novyi lef,* in which he polemicized against the defenders of "correct" perspective traditionally used by architectural photographers.[64] Reviewing the book the year before, on the contrary, El Lissitzky had lamented the absence of photographs taken from the top of the buildings, as well as Mendelsohn's inability to reveal the "movement of human masses among these architectural masses."[65]

Mendelsohn's ideas about the American city received ample attention in the *New York Times*, which carried in a two-page article by art critic Herman G. Scheffauer, illustrated with three photographs reproduced from *Amerika*.[66] Scheffauer's article praised Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut as the "fierce disciples of Americanism […] who surpassed American architects by the sheer, naked simplicity of their utilitarian

64. Alexander Rodchenko, "Puti suvremonnoi fotografii," *Novyi lef*, No. 9 (1928), pp. 31–39, trans. John E. Bowlt "The Paths of Modern Photography," in *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, edited by Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989), pp. 256–63. See also Bernd Stiegler, "Quand une vue d'arbres est presque un crime. Rodtchenko, Vertov, Kalatozov," *Études photographiques*, No. 23 (May 2009), pp. 6–29.

65. El Lissitzky, "Glaz Arkhitektora," *Stroitelnaya promyshlennost* (Construction Industry), No. 2 (1926), trans. Alan Upchurch "The Architect's Eye," in *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 221–26.

66. Herman G. Scheffauer, "The Skyscraper Has Found No Favor in European Cities," *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1926, pp. 11, 22.

structures," and qualified Mendelsohn as "the most revolutionary master-builder of modern Germany." Most of the Scheffauer review was devoted to the current transatlantic debate and to Mendelsohn's opinions on the state of American architecture, which he reportedly critiqued – as Le Corbusier would have done in later years – for its disorderly growth, lack of a coherent urban vision, and insufficient freedom from academicism. Although the photographic book, strangely enough, was never mentioned in the article, Scheffauer clearly referred to it when he commented on its peculiar integration of images and texts: "with his trained eyes he has caught this civilization, this architecture unawares, stripped it, scrutinized it, even photographed it from new angles. He has set down his judgements in words that thunder in their epigrammatic form." Mendelsohn's photographs were discussed as "auxiliaries" to his architectural analysis, but their interpretive value was fully recognized:

> Mendelsohn began to play with out titans of steel and stone. His camera, perched at strategic points unknown to the layman, became an effective auxiliary. He photographed their unlovely but honest and often imposing rear elevations, gave us X-ray photographs of their stark skeletons, caught the chaos of gaping and darkening street walls from various angles, fixed the streaking rapids of electric light in our streets […].[67]

Contrary to Rodchenko, who had praised Mendelsohn's photographs for representing buildings "in an honest way, just as the man in the street could see them," Scheffauer presented them as offering perspectives "unknown to the layman."[68] The *New York Times* critic was not mistaken in noticing that some of Mendelsohn's photographs were taken from unexpected, if not totally "unknown," vantage points, privileging the back

67. Ibid., p. 11.
68. Rodchenko, "The Paths of Modern Photography," p. 262.

rather than the front of the building – the "unconscious," one may say, as opposed to the rational aspects of modern architectural design. It was specifically this strategy that distinguished Mendelsohn's depiction of New York from his predecessors.[69]

Although Evans was in France at the time when this article was published, it is not unlikely that these ideas reached his attention two years later, when he began to take photographs in Manhattan. In terms of subject matter (skyscrapers, grain elevators, city signs, fire escapes) and general approach (mixing front and rear views), many photographs and negatives in the Walker Evans Archive are strikingly reminiscent of Mendelsohn's *Amerika*. Stylistically, Evans's views were less descriptive and more ambiguous, as they often excluded the kind of contextual information that was necessary for Mendelsohn's illustrative purposes. Nonetheless, Evans seemed to share with the German architect a pervading sense of contempt for the city, seen as an emblem of the country's lack of values: in Mendelsohn's words, "the untroubled buoyancy of America, of its external might, but also of its spiritual poverty."[70]

2.3 Evans's circle

Evans became familiar with the technical aspects of modern architecture and city planning via Paul Grotz, a young architect one year his elder who was a practicing architect in Stuttgart (where Mendelsohn designed the Schocken Department Store in

69. Manfredo Tafuri's dismissal of *Amerika* as "immersed in a mystical atmosphere reminiscent of that of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,*" likening Mendelsohn's photographs to the drawings of Hugh Ferriss, seems to be based less on the actual consideration of Mendelsohn's visual strategies than on the typical heavy inking of the Mosse editions, a printing style that can also be found in books like Richard Neutra's *Wie Baut Amerika?* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1927). See Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. P. D'Acierno and R. Connolly (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 174.

70. Mendelsohn, *Amerika,* p. 92.

1926–1928) before he emigrated to New York at the end of the 1920s.[71] Grotz, himself a photographer, introduced Evans to the most advanced equipment of the time, lending him a 35 mm Leica camera imported from Germany. According to his recollections, at the end of the 1920s they spent substantial time together exploring New York's architecture and discussing German art and cinema.[72] In May 1929 they drove to Quebec and Montreal, where Evans photographed the grain elevators around the harbor; in August, they went up the Chanin Building on Lexington Avenue and took about fifty photographs of the Chrysler Building under construction across the street.[73] Traces of these collaborative trips involving aspects of the modern city can be found in an interesting portfolio titled *New York,* now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (2012.175.1–13), consisting of thirteen prints made by Grotz in 1928–1930, partly coincident with photographs taken by Evans in the same period (figs. 24, 378). It was probably with Grotz's assistance (who in 1934 would become art editor of the *Architectural Forum*) that Evans assembled his first published series, five "photographic studies" of urban motifs that appeared in *Architectural Record* in September 1930.

During his first years as a photographer, Evans received technical advice and other forms of support from a number of colleagues. Iago Galdston, a Russian-born physician, amateur photographer, and neighbor when he lived in Brooklyn Heights in 1929, was probably the first to collect Evans's prints from 1928–1930, which are now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.[74] Talbot M. Brewer, Evans's brother in law,

71. On Paul Grotz (1902–1990), Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 91–92; Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, pp. 33–34; Richard O. Ware, *Walker Evans. The Victorian Houses Project, 1930–1931*, Master's Thesis, University of New Mexico, 1989, p. 22; Eklund, "Exile's Return," p. 32. See also "Grotz, Paul," in *Die Gesellschaft: Almanach der Stuttgarter Gesellschaft*, 1928–1929, p. 41 and *Deutsches Reichs-Adressbuch für Industrie, Gewerbe, Handel und Landwirtschaft*, 1929, 1. Band, p. 1859.

72. Interview with Dorothy and Paul Grotz, October 1, 1988, quoted in Morris Hambourg, "From 291 to the Museum of Modern Art," p. 282, notes 172 and 181.

73. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 97.

74. Twelve original prints dating from 1928–1930 (MoMA 67–78.1977). On Galdston, see Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 82–83, 113 and Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 35.

was also an amateur photographer: during his trips abroad he occasionally recorded shop windows and commercial signs, but it is doubtful whether he influenced Evans's decision to work in the medium.[75]

In fact, the only colleague whose support Evans publicly recognized throughout his life was Ralph Steiner (1899–1986), a multifaceted photographer who graduated from Dartmouth Colleg before moving to the Clarence H. White School of Modern Photography in 1921–1922, where he developed a cunning eye for revealing details of the ordinary landscape. During the 1920s Steiner became familiar with the most advanced art circles of New York, including theatre, cinema, and the visual arts, while at the same time working as a successful commercial photographer for magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.[76] In 1929 he made his first experimental film, *H_2O*; in the early 1930s he joined the Group Theatre (founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg) and the Workers Film and Photo League, which was connected to the European Worker Photography Movement.[77]

Steiner met Evans at the end of the decade, giving him technical advice on both photography and film and lending him a professional 6 ½ × 8 ½ in. camera that Evans used between 1930 and 1932.[78] As Evans wrote in 1931,

75. Curator Keith F. Davis has suggested a connection between the two photographers in the exhibition *Talbot M. Brewer & Walker Evans: A Family Affair*, Middlebury College Museum of Art, July 9-October 31, 1998 and in *An American Century of Photography from Dry-Plate to Digital: The Hallmark Photographic Collection* (Kansas City, Mo.: Hallmark Cards, in association with H.N. Abrams, 1999), pp. 167 and 540, note 402; Further information is provided by Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 69, 77 and Talbot Brewer Jr., "World War I Experiences of Talbot M. Brewer," available online at http://www.longwood.k12.ny.us/history/upton/brewer.htm (accessed July 19, 2009).

76. Ralph Steiner, "To Be Nobody But Yourself: Ralph Steiner on Walker Evans," *Photo Techniques*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2000), pp. 26–31. For information about Steiner's early work, see Carol J. Payne, *Interactions of Photography and the Mass Media, 1920–1941: The Early Career of Ralph Steiner*, PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1999.

77. "Ralph Steiner," *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (December 1976), pp. 537–40.

78. Eklund, "Exile's Return," p. 37.

> Ralph Steiner the photographer has turned out to be most generous, and has offered to teach me photography. He is a bitter little Jew, intelligent, whose limitations are skillfully blurred. Probably not clear in his own mind about what he is doing (he can make money with tragic ease). I will let him work on me as much as he likes. He has made a few of the best street snapshots of people I have seen, but doesn't show them. People greeting one another, showing off, et cet. Not enough done, though.[79]

In the early 1920s, Steiner's style oscillated between the fuzziness of the Pictorialist school and the modernist experimentations of the avant-garde: while his studies of mechanical forms and cast shadows collected under the title *The Beater and the Pan* (1921–1922) echoed works by Man Ray such as *L'homme* (1918) and *La femme* (1920), in a portfolio on Dartmouth College published the following year he reverted to the escapist approach of the previous generation.[80] By 1931, he had completely embraced the modernist aesthetic: reviewing the 14th Annual International Salon of Pictorial Photography in *Creative Art*, he mocked amateur photographers for their stale iconography of "kittens in baskets, boat reflections, views through arched doorways, the little gray home in the West at the end of the Hogarth S curve road, and all those Art Study nudes with hoops."[81]

79. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, July 4, 1931 (WEA 1994.260.25 [31]), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, pp. 154–55. The anti-Semitic taint of the letter resonates with similar remarks Evans made about Alfred Stieglitz and cinematographer Leo Hurvitz. See for example Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 196 and WEA 1994.250.7 (7). Evans however continued to acknowledge Steiner's support in his late interviews: see Goell, "Walker Evans Recalls Beginning," p. 55.

80. A. Ralph Steiner, *Dartmouth* (Brooklyn, NY: The Albertype Co., 1922). The portfolio titled *The Beater and the Pan* is in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (83.109.1–8). See also Payne, *Interactions of Photography and the Mass Media, 1920–1941*, pp. 45–46.

81. Ralph Steiner, Review of *The Pictorialist*, 1931, *Creative Art*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (May 1931), p. 381.

One strain of Steiner's production of the 1920s and early '30 proved particularly successful, with iconic images made in the "straight" mode like *Typewriter Keys* (1921) and *American Rural Baroque* (1929) (fig. 675), as well as several photographs of movie posters and commercial signs, such as *Lollipop* (1922) and *Saratoga Coal Company* (1929). It was probably his ironic treatment of the advertising rhetoric that triggered Evans's initial interest in New York's neon signs and theatre marquees, a theme that he further developed in the mid 1930s when he made extensive records of hand-painted shop signs in the Southern towns.[82]

As a member of the *Little Review* group and a co-organizer of the Machine-Age Exposition in 1927, Steiner occasionally infused his work with constructivist ideas probably derived by artists like Louis Lozowick, also a member of the *Little Review* group and a prominent popularizer of Russian art.[83] Contrary to Steiner, however, Evans rarely dwelled on purely abstract or geometrical compositions of modern materials. Differences between their respective approaches emerged in the Spring of 1931, when the two photographers, together with Margaret Bourke-White (recently returned from the Soviet Union), had a group exhibition at the John Becker Gallery. As Mehemed Fehmy Agha (Condé Nast's art editor) wrote in the exhibition brochure, the value of Steiner's work resided in the "purely photographic technique, the solid and unassuming compositions – and the exceptional quality of textures"; although Evans was dubbed a "patternist" by another reviewer, Agha considered him "one of the objectively recording photographers" and compared his record of New York made of "steel girders, luminous signs and Coney Island bathers" to the work of Eugène Atget.[84] Retrospectively,

82. For a joint discussion, see Barnaby Haran, "The New Vision in American Photography: Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans, and 'Americanism'," *Object*, No. 8 (2005–2006), pp. 26–44.

83. For an example of the "constructivist" discourse surrounding Steiner's work, see the series of four photographs published in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (February 1927), pp. 101–104. Steiner took an iconic portrait of Lozowick in the late 1920s (MMA 1975.513).

84. M[ehemed] F[ehmy] Agha, "Photography," in *Margaret Bourke-White, Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans: Photographs by Three Americans*, exhibition brochure, John Becker Gallery, April 18-May 8,

however, it is clear that the main difference between Steiner's and Evans's urban photographs, despite their mutual respect and their iconographic similarities, lies in the value they attached to the medium's interpretive capacity: unlike Steiner, who privileged single images precisely crafted to defuse the "fooishnesses and crazinesses of the world," very early on Evans defined a set of subjects that he continued to explore with regularity, developing photographic series and sequences in order to tackle the multilayered nature of the modern city.[85]

At the end of 1929, or shortly thereafter, Evans had the opportunity to share these ideas with another photographer who was going to help him define his project, Berenice Abbott. Born in Springfield, Ohio, in 1898, Abbott briefly studied journalism before she relocated to New York at the age of 20, living in the Greenwich Village while she practiced sculpture and supported herself taking odd jobs. In the winter of 1921 she moved again, this time to Paris, where she studied at the at Académie de la Grande Chaumière of sculptor Émile Antoine Bourdelle;[86] in 1923 she was in Berlin, taking classes at an art school and meeting with other American expatriates, such as writer Djuna Barnes or artists Marsden Hartley and Arnold Rönnebeck.[87] Back in Paris later that year, Abbott began working as Man Ray's darkroom assistant, developing an independent career as a portraitist of the Parisian intelligentsia with support from Peggy Guggenheim, Robert McAlmon and his wife Bryher (Winifred Ellerman).[88]

Abbott's earliest photographs, made in 1924 during a trip to Amsterdam, show the influence of post-Pictorialism (possibly via Coburn) in terms of subject matter,

1931 (WEA 1994.250.87) and Walter Knowlton, "Around the galleries," *Creative Art*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (May 1931), pp. 375–76.

85. Steiner, "To Be Nobody But Yourself," p. 29.

86. Passport application, January 22, 1921. Abbott's identifying witness was Man Ray.

87. Townsend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992, revised edition Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 158.

88. Arlen J. Hansen, *Expatriate Paris: A Cultural and Literary Guide to Paris of the 1920s* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), p. 158.

composition, and printing style.[89] Her approach to the city changed drastically at end of the decade, when she abandoned her successful business in Paris and returned to New York with a scheme to work exclusively on urban themes.[90] During her first trip, in January 1929, Abbott took over 200 photographs with a portable camera – later collected in an album, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum – that show the range of her interests in the newly discovered urbanscape of Manhattan: old and new skyscrapers, construction sites, street life, transportation, signs, a marching band with policemen in their uniforms.[91] After a last trip to Paris to dismantle her studio, she settled in New York in April 1929, starting a ten-year project that finally was published in 1939 under the title *Changing New York*, with extensive texts on the city's life and architecture by her companion, art critic Elizabeth McCausland.[92]

When Evans met Abbott in 1929, he had been working for about a year on the same subjects that she had recorded on her first visit to New York. A series of posed portraits he made around this time suggest that they rapidly developed a close friendship and that they influenced each other in defining their parallel projects. In a letter to Hanns Skolle dated February 25, 1930, Evans spoke sympathetically of his new acquaitance.[93] Within months, she arranged to have two of his recent photographs of

89. At least two were exibited in a 1976 exhibition (*Berenice Abbott,* exhibition catalog, Marlborough Gallery, New York, January 6–24), but they are seldom reproduced. See *View of Amsterdam*, c. 1924, in Hank O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982), p. 10 and *Facades, Amsterdam*, c. 1924 (Peter Fetterman Gallery, Santa Monica). See also *The Unknown Berenice Abbott*, Vol. 1, *New York – Early Work, 1929–1931* edited by Ron Kurtz and Hank O'Neal (Gottingen: Steidl, 2013).

90. Terri Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2011), p. 43.

91. See MMA 1977.662.1–4, 1978.641.1–11, 1979.678.1–44, 1981.1246.1–100, 1982. 1180.1–130, and 1984.1097.1–18.

92. Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth McCausland, *Changing New York* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1939).

93. Quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 111.

New York published in an architectural book by Belgian critic Manuel Casteels; it was possibly with her help that Evans's work was featured in the *Internationale Ausstellung das Lichtbild,* a touring exhibition of modern photography held in Munich in the summer of 1930, following the groundbreaking *Film und Foto* show of 1929.[94] Some of the snapshots of her 1929 album and few sparse photographs of the early 1930s seem to suggest that the two friends occasionally worked side by side (figs. 409, 558) and thanks to Abbott's generosity, Evans continued to use her darkroom into the mid-1930s, when he was working for the Resettlement Administration.[95]

With the exception of Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, the New York project of Berenice Abbott was probably Evans's first encounter with a photographic text aimed at a selective critique of the modern city. In the following years, Abbott would turn her initial exploration of Manhattan into a systematic survey of the urban environment, focusing on the historical development of the city and progressively leaving its people in the background. *Changing New York* owed much of its philosophy to Abbott's understanding of the work of Atget, which she had salvaged from oblivion (and possibly from dispersal) at the time of the photographer's death in 1927. Like Atget, she occasionally photographed the *métiers* of New York – a street vendor, a newspaper stand – but the central subject of her project was the long-term stratification of the urbanscape. And like Atget, she was not interested in sensational photographs of record-setting skyscraper, but in the creation of an photographic archive that could serve as a guide to the apparent chaos of the metropolis for present and future citizens.

Making new prints from Atget's glass negatives that she had acquired (with support from Julien Levy), publishing articles on his lifelong documentation of Old Paris, and popularizing his work among American artists, architects, and nostalgic lovers of the past, Abbott changed the course of international photography for decades to come. As

94. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, June 19, 1930 (WEA 1994.260.25 [29]), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 117.

95. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 270.

a practicing photographer and as the custodian of Atget's oeuvre, she also contributed to Evans's ideas on the medium, providing a model of unswerving commitment. His appreciation of Atget was made explicit in the *Hound & Horn* review of 1931, "The Reappearance of Photography," when he wrote:

> Certain men of the past century have been renoticed who stood away from this confusion. Eugène Atget worked right through a period of utter decadence in photography. He was simply isolated, and his story is a little difficult to understand. Apparently he was oblivious to everything but the necessity of photographing Paris and its environs [...] His general note is lyrical understanding of the street, trained observation of it, special feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail.[96]

In 1938, sketching a page of acknowledgements for his forthcoming book, *American Photographs*, he penned a dedication "To Berenice Abbott, for having been an honest and uncompromising artist from her beginning."[97] In her achievement, as in the work of Atget, he saw the same authentic passion for a photographic practice intended as "civic documentary history," to quote Peter Barr's definition of *Changing New York*.[98]

Evans's approach, however, remained quite different from Abbott's. Projecting into his photographs a rich array of interdisciplinary concerns absorbed from painting,

96. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 126. It should be added that in his review Evans also expressed some misgivings about the poor printing quality of the Atget book.

97. Quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 393.

98. Peter Barr, "Berenice Abbott's Changing New York and Urban Planning Debates in the 1930s," in *The Built Surface*, Vol. 2, *Architecture and the Pictorial Arts from Romanticism to the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Karen Koehler (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 257–82, esp. 264 ff. See also John Raeburn, "'Culture Morphology' and Cultural History in Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*," in *Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies*, edited by Jack Salzman, Vol. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 255–91.

literature, and architecture, Evans probed the boundaries of "documentary" photography as Abbott would define it in 1942:

> Selection makes the photographer a true historian. He must know what to photograph and what not to photograph, to give meaning to his visual chronicle of civilization. It is not enough to record what exists today; the photographer must make his document significant. Here the artist is needed, for form and composition emphasize the drama of the contemporary city.[99]

Evans's archive shows that his radical strategies of selection differed greatly from the extensive coverage of New York put in place by Abbott's project, which was defined less by a choice of visual themes than by the aspiration to construct a plausible "portrait" of the city. Relatively uninterested in the constructive values of "form and composition," Evans turned Atget's "eye for revealing detail" into an oblique commentary on American urban life. Photographs like *City Lunch Counter, New York*, 1929 (fig. 429) or *Truck and Sign*, 1930 (fig. 280) hinted at the hidden or unconscious angst of ordinary life. This program echoed certain aspects of Ralph Steiner's work; it may also have been inspired by magazines like *Der Querschnitt*, a German monthly that published funny, Dada-inspired pictures, which Evans for some time collected in a scrapbook.[100] Thus in the mid-1930s Abbott spoke of her "fantastic passion" for New York, possibly hinting to the notion of "*fantastique social*" – the uncanny "social fantastic" of modern life – developed in France by Pierre Mac Orlan.[101] Evans, on the contrary, wrote disparagingly:

99. Berenice Abbott, "Documenting the City," *The Complete Photographer*, Vol. 4, No. 22 (April 20, 1942), pp. 1393–1405 (quotation p. 1398).

100. See Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, pp. 212–14.

101. Elizabeth McCausland, "The Photography of Berenice Abbott," *Trend*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March-April 1935), pp. 15–18, 21; Pierre Mac Orlan, "La photographie et le fantastique social," *Les annales politiques et littéraires*, No. 2321 (November 1, 1928), pp. 413–14 and "Photographie: éléments

one part of a city
impaled
punctured cubes
full of stenographers desires banalities
not good enough for their shell.[102]

An important discovery that Evans did share with Abbott when she returned from Paris was the work of an obscure photographer named Percy Loomis Sperr (1889–1964), who in the 1920s devoted his entire professional life to recording the urbanscape of New York. Born in Columbus, Ohio, and educated at Oberlin College, Sperr probably moved to the city in 1924, carrying along his literary aspirations and some practice in journalism.[103] Almost immediately he began to take photographs, initially as a member of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.[104] Although he worked independently, he regularly sold photographs to the New York Public Library, contributing to the creation of an invaluable body of documentary views within the Library's

de fantastique social," *Le Crapouillot*, January 1929, pp. 3–5, trans. Robert Erich Wolf "Elements of a Social Fantastic," in *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 31–33. See also the McCausland's letter to Abbott, November 5, 1934, quoted in Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott*, p. 90.

102. Two-page manuscript, WEA 1994.250.4 (7), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 71.

103. Although the New York Public Library holds a large collection of urban photographs commissioned to Sperr in the 1920s and '30s, the photographer's life and work remain basically uninvestigated. Precious information is provided by A. J. Peluso, Jr., "'The Tale of the City of New York': Percy Loomis Sperr," unpublished essay (May 1999?), vertical file, "Photographers – Sperr, Percy L. (1890? [sic]–6/25/64)," Local History and Genealogy Division, New York Public Library. A substantial purchase of 2,813 prints occurred in 1941, while a donation of 1,250 photographs of New York, Brooklyn and Staten Island was made by Sperr in 1960–1961. See "Report of the Director," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (March 1941), p. 197 and Vol. 65, No. 10 (December 1961), p. 671. For a passing mention of Sperr's work, see Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920–1945* (Paris: Macula, 2001), p. 86, note 3.

104. Sperr's earliest photographs are mentioned in Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, *Proceedings,* Vol. 1 (New Brighton, N.Y., 1923), p. 128.

Picture Collection. Formally established in 1926, the Collection was initially directed by Ellen Perkins and subsequently by Romana Javitz, who in the 1930s developed the Library's photographic section in tandem with the Resettlement Administration and the Works Progress Administration.[105]

Considering that in 1924–1925 Evans was working in the Map Room and that he continued to attend the Library in the following years, ha was in the best position to consult Sperr's photographs as he developed his own project on New York City.[106] A personal connection between Evans and Sperr can also be conjectured, as in 1924 the latter published an article in the *New York Tribune* on the variety of patrons that attended the Map Room of the New York Public Library, indicating that he also was an *habitué* of the Library or that he worked there in same capacity as Evans.[107]

In his recollections, Evans occasionally remarked that the only influence he may have had from the photographic world of the time came from professional rather than art photographers. While this may not be totally accurate, various clues indicate that although Evans pursued an intellectual career since the beginning of his involvement with photography, he also derived ideas and indications from operators like Sperr, whose visual culture had been shaped by their work in the field rather than by the principles and the programs of artistic modernism. It has never been noticed, for example, that at least two skyscraper photographs in Evans's archive are strikingly similar, in terms of framing and vantage point, to parallel photographs made and published by

105. On the Picture Collection, see Anthony T. Troncale, "Worth Beyond Words: Romana Javitz and The New York Public Library's Picture Collection," originally published in *Biblion: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fall 1995), pp. 115–38.

106. Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, pp. 23–24.

107. Percy Loomis Sperr, "The Part That Old Maps Play in Modern Business," *New York Tribune*, February 3, 1924, pp. 12–13, quoted in Alice Hudson, "The Map Division in Press: More than Fifteen Minutes of Fame," *Meridian. A Journal of the Map and Geography Round Table of the American Library Association*, No. 13 (1998), pp. 61–62. See also P. L. Sperr, "What Price Straw Braid? The Public Library: An Information Desk that Serves Every Branch of Business," *The Office Economist*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (June 1925), pp. 3–6.

commercial photographers of the time, such as Ira W. Martin and Ewing Galloway (figs. 352–353, 372–374). Another instance is represented by two identical views of the Con Edison Power Plant on East 38th Street, which Walker Evans and Martin Bruehl took on separate occasions in 1930 (figs. 344, 345). The dates of these photographs cannot be determined with enough precision to ascertain whether Evans duplicated photographs that he saw in publications of the time, whether he was in direct contact with their makers, or whether on the contrary he was plagiarized by such commercial photographers. These coincidences, in any case, indicate that his project on New York was informed, at least in part, by the iconography generated at a popular level, much like in later years his photographs of provincial America were consonant with the anonymous postcards that he collected for decades.[108]

Similar analogies can also be established with the work of Percy Loomis Sperr, who in the 1920s began to document New York City almost street by street, covering the metropolitan area from downtown Manhattan to the Bronx, including large sections of Brooklyn and the Queens, often registering changes in the urban landscape with photographs taken at time intervals. Sperr's urban photographs presently in the collection of the New York Public Library amount to over 17,000 items, with the oldest photographs dating back to the early 1920s. Mounted on stock board and accurately captioned to include chronological and geographical information, these images were made available to the general public. As in other repositories of this kind, photographs were consulted by all sorts of patrons, including historians and visual artists. For example, a Precisionist painting by Charles L. Goeller (1901–1955) titled *Third Avenue*, 1934 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1964.1.142) is definitely based on a Sperr photograph captioned "December 23, 1936" (NYPL 0324-B2). Although Goeller's treatment of the city's surfaces is obviously different from the original photograph in

108. Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (Göttingen: Steidl and New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

terms of color, light, texture, and informative detail, his painting fully endorses the particular point of view adopted by the photographer at the intersection of Third Avenue and East 19th Street, centered on the Chrysler Building in the background. Also important, Sperr's caption – whose historical reliability is generally supported by evidence included in his photographs, such as new buildings and construction sites – indicates that the painting was made at a later time, most probably in 1937.[109]

The Sperr Collection at the New York Public Library proves to be a unique source for determining the date and place of New York photographs taken by artists of the 1920s and 1930 (including Evans), whose documentary value is often obscured by issues of form and style. The recurrence of conspicuous sites and vantage points in Evans's early photographs, in particular, suggests that he may have entertained a closer relationship with Sperr's archive and, possibly, with Sperr himself. The vantage point of two bird's-eye views of the 111 John Street Building, probably taken by Evans in December 1928, appears to be too specific, and too similar to corresponding Sperr photographs of the period, to indicate a chance coincidence (figs. 90–93). Similar considerations can be developed for a group of images of New York State Canal Terminal in Gowanus – quite distant from Evans's habitual route between Brooklyn Heights and Downtown Manhattan (figs. 621, 622) – and for later photographs taken at the intersection of South Street and Maiden Lane (figs. 264, 265).

Most probably, Sperr's systematic archive was of immediate utility for Abbott's project on New York. The correspondence between his photographs of the 1920s and Abbott's initial explorations of the city, both in term of subjects and of vantage point, is even more consistent than Evans's. Consider, for example, the literal coincidence

109. Although Sperr's photograph could have been made after Goeller's painting, I tend to read a number of specific elements in the painting as being inspired by the photographic view, such as the figure of the man furtively turning the street corner (a woman in the photograph) and the texture of the street pavement in the foreground. For a discussion of Goeller's *Third Avenue*, see Ann Prentice Wagner, *1934: A New Deal for Artists* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2009), p. 112.

between Sperr's view of the Hanover Square Station taken on June 13, 1929 (NYPL 0956-B4) and Abbott's version of May 25, 1936 (NYPL 0956-B3).[110] Another significant example, considering the careful placing of the camera and of the person portrayed at the center of the picture, is Abbott's famous photograph of the Blossom Restaurant at 103 Bowery (NYPL MFZ [Abbott] 96–4294, October 3, 1935), modelled on Sperr's similar scene of May 9, 1934 (NYPL 0713-B3).[111]

The difference between Sperr's and Abbott's project should not be understestimated: while the older photographer generally worked on commission to create a general survey of the New York urbanscape, Abbott focused her interest on buildings and scenes that witnessed the transformation of the city. From Sperr she may have derived the notion of the individual photograph as a historical record, accompanied by accurate captions indicating place, date, and nominal subjects, and she may have agreed with Sperr when he suggested that "A little data with each picture may some day be worth a small fortune to the historian."[112] Also, it is not unlikely that both Abbott and Evans – who in 1929–1930 had shifted their attention from the vertiginous perspectives of the New Vision to Atget's street-level observations – by the end of the decade began to

110. Reprinted in Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: New Press: Museum of the City of New York, 1997), section "Lower East Side", pl. 33.

111. Ibid., section "Wall Street, City Hall, and South Street Districts", pl. 15. Curiously, these similarities went unnoticed by scholars. Abbott's sources were mixed: her *Forty-Eight Street, looking north-west from a point between Second and Third Avenue, Manhattan* (NYPL 0549-C5; February 1, 1938) is a duplicate of Erich Mendelsohn's photograph of the Shelton Hotel in *Amerika*, p. 195. For a different evaluation of Abbott's awareness of Sperr's work, see Julia Van Haaften's memorandum to Gunther Pohl (Chief of the Local History and Genealogy Division of the New York Public Library) dated May 21, 1980, commenting on a group of Sperr's photographs up for auction: "The next two lots show more sensitivity to individual subjects and architectural detail and could well have been influenced by such a series as B. Abbott's of similar subjects.": Vertical file, "Photographers – Sperr, Percy L.," Local History and Genealogy Division, New York Public Library.

112. Quoted in Peluso, "'The Tale of the City of New York': Percy Loomis Sperr," p. 5.

use Sperr's archive as a visual guide to New York, allowing them to identify and select interesting subjects for their respective projects.[113]

Sperr was, in a sense, an American Atget. Less gifted than his French counterpart in the rendition of urban space and in the discovery of significant details, he was animated by the same affection for his adopted city, which over the course of a decade led him to explore most of New York's streets, standing at an intersection or climbing on top of a skyscraper. The ambition of Sperr's omnivorous eye is recorded in his business card (circa 1940s), in which he advertised "A growing collection of over 30,000 views," including the following areas of specialization:

1. New York Harbor: Ships, old and modern; Skylines, Dock Scenes, Harbor Craft, Sunset, Bridges, Naval Vessels.
2. New York City, all five boroughs; Street Scenes, Skyscrapers, Old Houses, Foreign Quarters, Pushcarts, Farms, Old New York Scenes.[114]

Despite this range of subjects, this list was only partial. A remarkable series of almost 180 photographs in the collection of the New York Public Library, for example, is devoted to squatter colonies in Brooklyn and Manhattan in the early 1930s. Reminiscent of Eugène Atget's album on the *zoniers* of Paris – the ragpickers forced to live precariously in shacks on the outskirts of the city – these photographs offer an alternative image of New York's life that was rarely depicted by photographers and painters of the

113. An extended series of Abbott photographs taken with a hand-held camera in 1929, showing skyscrapers and urban scenes, forms a dismembered album in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession numbers 1977.662.1–4, 1978.641.1–11, 1979.678.1–44, 1981.1246.1–100, 1982.1180.1–130, and 1984.1097.1–18).

114. Vertical file, "Photographers – Sperr, Percy L.," NYPL. A similiar list of subjects was published in Sperr's self-published portfolio, *Island Scenes: Pictures of Staten Island, its beauty spots, historic houses, parks, bridges, public buildings and other points of interest selected from a portfolio of over 5000 views* (1937).

time.[115] The few publications that Sperr managed to obtain during his lifetime indicate that his photographic interests were purely documentary.[116]

Considering not only the coincidences in vantage point, but also the temporal proximity of some of Evans's photographs with the records at the Public Library, it cannot be ruled out that the young photographer even worked for Sperr and that in fact he took some of the images in the NYPL collection. Differences in style among the thousands of photographs signed by Sperr suggest that he was not the only cameraman employed in the project; Evans, on the other hand, may have accepted to work for hire – taking photographs around the city or even printing negatives – as an alternative to the part-time job he held on Wall Street in 1929.[117] Whether Abbott and Evans had direct contact with Sperr or whether they only browsed his photographs at the New York Public Library, the younger photographers appropriated aspects of his method and developed it into a more sophisticated, intellectual scheme.

In addition to photographic books and public repositories like the New York Public Library, by the end of the 1920s photographs of the city were being shown in a large number of art venues. In 1929, Alfred Stieglitz opened An American Place at 509 Madison Avenue, where he showed mostly paintings by Arthur Dove, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, and Charles Demuth, and where in 1932 he also held his first one-person exhibition in eight years. Other private galleries began to present modern photographs, including the Becker Galleries, also inaugurated in 1929.[118] Two years later Julien Levy, after a period of apprenticeship at Carl Zigrosser's Weyhe

115. Squatters were the subject of two sketches on the "architecture of unemployment" made in Brooklyn and in Central Park by Robert Wiseman and published in *Pencil Points*, Vol. 13, No. 12 (December 1932), p. 840. For the *zoniers*, see Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 165–75, 397–412.

116. See, for example, P. L. Sperr, "An Old-World Festa Among the Skyscrapers," *Travel*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (March 1925), pp. 12–13, 42.

117. See Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 107.

118. Morris Hambourg, "From 291 to the Museum of Modern Art," p. 47.

Gallery at 794 Lexington Avenue, opened his own space at 602 Madison Avenue, starting a with a retrospective exhibition of American photographers of the Stieglitz circle in November 1931, followed in December by Atget and Nadar.[119] Other important venues that occasionally showed photography were Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery (113 West 13th Street) opened in November 1926, Alma Reed's Delphic Studios, and the the Daniel Gallery (2 West 47th Street), which closed down in 1932.[120]

Among New York's major institutions, the Metropolitan Museum began acquiring photographs in 1928 under the directorship of William M. Ivins, who had created the Prints Department in 1916. The Brooklyn Museum, established in 1895, promoted a school of photography (via the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences) and began forming a collection in 1899. Although it specialized in architectural records (mainly under the impulse of its director, William Henry Goodyear) and on Pictorial photography, in 1932 the museum mounted the first exhibition of international modern photography to be held at a New York public institution. Also in 1932, the Museum of Modern Art, founded in November 1929, held its first photographic exhibition, Murals by American Painters and Photographers, organized by Lincoln Kirstein.[121]

None of these museums, however, devoted sustained attention to the changing urbanscape of New York. While city photographs formed a large percentage of the

119. Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: C. G. Putnam's Sons, 1977), p. 46; Katherine Ware, Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 22 ff.; Gaëlle Morel, "Un marchand sans marché: Julien Levy et la photographie," *Études photographiques*, No. 21 (December 2007), pp. 6–29.

120. Diane Tepfer, *Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery Downtown: 1926–1940: A Study in American Art Patronage*, PhD Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1989, p. 44. For an overview, see John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 51–55.

121. *International Exhibition of Photography*, curated by Josiah P. Marvel (Brooklyn Museum, March 8–31, 1932) and *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, curated by Lincoln Kirstein (The Museum of Modern Art, May 3–31, 1932).

iconography of art photographers at the end of the 1920s – thus marking a decisive shift from the Pictorialist escapism of the previous generation – support for the advancement of critical thinking on the image of New York came primarily from institutions like the New York Public Library and the Museum of the City of New York.[122] The examples of Erich Mendelsohn's book, Percy Loomis Sperr's archive, and Sherman M. Fairchild's aerial coverage of New York indicate that during the 1920s the visual representation of the contemporary city evolved from the uniqueness of the icon to the discursive order of the series. Only a few photographers like Abbott and Evans, however, managed to develop long-term visual projects that could grasp the complexity of the metropolis, with its growing size, the rapid pace of its change, and the Babelic nature of its urbanscape. The repetitiveness of the skyscraper and the verticalization of the Manhattan grid urged artists and analysts alike to explore the city anew, in search of a meaningful narrative, of a structure, of a beginning or an end.

Significantly, in this period even Alfred Stieglitz abandoned the allegorical approach of photographs like *Spiritual America* (1923), in order to create repetitive series of the Manhattan skyline under different light conditions.[123] Unlike Stieglitz, however, who observed the changing skyline from his rooms at the Shelton Hotel, Evans explored the city in the attempt to draw a new interpretive map. Over the course of five years, he took photographs of tall buildings in the Financial District and in the Grand Central area, of wooden houses on West and South Streets, construction sites on 14th Street and Central Park South, industrial smokestacks on First Avenue and in Brooklyn. But

122. The role of the MCNY during the first decades of the 20th century is discussed in Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 145 ff.

123. *Spiritual America* depicts the groin of a harnessed gelding as a metaphor for the country's puritanism and work ethic. For Stieglitz's photographs from the Shelton Hotel, see Barnaby Haran, 'Taming the Tentacles of Skyscrapers in American Photography: Alfred Stieglitz and Ralph Steiner's Sublime and Ridiculous Monsters," Monster Cities panel, Association of Art Historians Conference, Belfast, 2007.

he also recorded fragments of city life and city "types" such as workers, loafers, flappers, vendors, couples, bathers, in such diverse places as Lexington Avenue, South Street, across the street from Bloomingdale's, Gowanus, and Coney Island. Anticipating the binary structure of his classic book, *American Photographs*, during this period he constructed a dialogue between the city and its citizens that he continued to explore throughout his life. And in the conceptual middle ground between these two realms, he photographed neon signs, posters, advertising billboards, and theater marquees – the surface of the metropolis that enveloped the public space of its inhabitants with the unrelenting voice of commercialism.

CHAPTER THREE

ICONS OF MODERNITY, I: THE SKYSCRAPER

3.1 From the office building

In August 1934, the premature death of Raymond Hood – the architect of the Radiator Building (1924), the Beaux-Arts Apartments (1929), the Daily News Building (1930), the McGraw-Hill Building (1930–1931), as well as Rockefeller Center – offered the opportunity for a reconsideration of the skyscraper city.[1] As critics pointed out, although Hood had envisaged monumental, eye-arresting structures, he believed that the most significant innovation brought by tall buildings was the possibility they afforded of looking at the city from above. Hood's own architecture entailed not only a radical reorganization of citizens' perception of their own environment, but also a conceptual shift from the typical 19th-century city. As he stated in his presentation of the scheme for Rockefeller City in 1931,

> The view from the tower windows of Radio city – and the privileged towers of the blocks adjacent – will look down not upon the dirty-brown cluttered waste of unrelieved ugliness which is the roof view of New York, but upon a picture to which art and nature have contributed color and design with a note of gaiety.[2]

1. "Raymond Hood Dies; Built Skyscrapers," *New York Times*, August 15, 1934, p. 17. L. E. Cooper, "Helped to Change Skyline of Manhattan," *New York Times*, August 19, 1934, p. RE1. See also Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Skyward Trend of Thought. The Metaphysics of the American Skyscraper* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986).

2. Raymond Hood, "Hanging Gardens of New York," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 1931, p. 1; also quoted in "Raymond Hood Dies; Built Skyscrapers," p. 17. For the idea of architecture

Hood's futuristic view of the beneficial effects of tall skyscrapers on the spirit of the modern citizen was not altogether new. Similar ideas had been formulated in 1905 by Edgar Saltus as he looked down at the city from the twenty stories of the Flatiron Building:

> Evolution may be slow, but it is sure; yet, however slow, it achieved an unrecognized advance when it devised buildings such as this. It is demonstrable that small rooms breed small thoughts. It will be demonstrable that as buildings ascend so do ideas. It is mental progress that skyscrapers engender.[3]

It was precisely in those early years of the new century that photographers had begun to realize the fantastic potential of the aerial panoramas. Urban views had been a pictorial genre since at least the Middle Ages, but for centuries painters (and later photographers) who climbed on top of tall buldings to observe the city from within continued to represent it according to the rules applied to landscape, looking straight toward the horizon and occasionally raising their perspective to include more sky.[4] A view of Boston taken from a balloon by J. W. Black and Samuel W. King in 1860 introduced the notion of accidental perspective, but it was only at the time of Saltus's ponderings from the Flatiron that photographers began to look down at the city.[5] In 1906, *Harper's Weekly* published a stunning double-page zenithal photograph taken from the Times

as a didactic machine based on seeing, see Alessandra Ponte, "Thinking Machines: From the Outlook Tower to the City of the World," *Lotus*, No. 35 (1982), pp. 47–51.

3. Edgar Saltus, "New York from the Flatiron," *Munsey's Magazine,* Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 1905), p. 389.

4. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Encompassing City: Streetscapes in Early Modern Art and Culture* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 10 ff.

5. Hales, *Silver Cities*, pp. 136 ff.

Building, completed in 1904.[6] In 1907, the firm of George Grantham Bain published a series of views from the thirty-third floor of the Singer Building, "showing the appalling heights to which modern architectural science dares to climb."[7]

Soon thereafter, art photographers began to develop similar ideas. In his London and New York portfolios of 1909–1910, Alvin Langdon Coburn collected views of urban landmarks, depicting tall structures like the Brooklyn Bridge, the Singer Builing, and the Flatiron Building from a high vantage point and often using a long lens that compressed the visual field, but still adhering to the principles of "correct" or plausible perspective.[8] Two years later, Coburn began to experiment with more empathic, vertiginous representations of the growing city, as in *The House of a Thousand Windows* (1912), showing the Liberty Tower (designed by Henry Ives Cobb in 1909) from the adjoining Singer Building. Pointing the camera down toward the street, the photographer composed an image that was equally about the building itself and about the life of the city around it; and capitalizing on the optical distortion created by such unconventional use of the grandangular lens, he created a warped, dynamic geometry, in tune with the experiments of Futurist painters like Boccioni and of American artists like John Marin. Photographic historian Mike Ware has discussed Coburn's urban imagery from that period as "partly Whitmanian, partly apocalyptic or Futurist," noting that while Coburn was among the first to share the enthusiasm for the American skyscraper that animated the intellectual debate of the mid-1910s, he abandoned his optimism (and left

6. "Twenty-Eight Stories from Broadway," *Harper's Weekly*, Vol. 50, No. 2588 (July 28, 1906), pp. 1044–45.

7. "How Broadway Looks from Above," *The Technical World Magazine*, Vol. 8 (October 1907), pp. 224–25.

8. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *London*, with an introduction by Hilaire Belloc (London: Duckworth & Co.; New York: Brentano's, 1909) and *New York*, with a foreword by H. G. Wells (London: Duckworth & Co.; New York: Brentano's, 1910).

New York) in 1923–1924, when he began to sense the contradictions of urban capitalism that led to the Wall Street crash.[9]

In 1927, shortly after Coburn left New York, his mentor Alfred Stieglitz began to take views of Midtown from the tall buildings in which he resided (such as the Shelton Hotel, where he lived with Georgia O'Keeffe), or from his gallery (first the Intimate Gallery at Park Avenue at 59th Street then, from 1929, An American Place at 509 Madison Avenue, near at 53rd Street). Reverting to a more traditional, 19th-century style, he made a series of glacially-detailed records of the changing skyline under different types of light, including nocturnal views. It was, in a sense, a purely mental endeavor, apparently without author or style, much like the parallel series of the *Equivalents* that he had began to develop in 1922 – serial depictions of the sky partly influenced by Kandinsky's notion of improvisation.[10] Photographing the massive skyscrapers of the East 40s and 50s, Stieglitz apparently compiled a catalogue of forms in the tradition of Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*, as if studying the abstract structure and the formal variations of a natural phenomenon.[11] At the same time, the cold detachment of his observations was more than just a methodological stance: looking straight in front of him, unaffected by the mobile gaze of the New Vision, over the years he recorded the progressive invasion of the visual field by the steel cages and the massive cubes of modern architecture. Considering the ephemeral clouds and the deep skies that he was photographing in the same years, it is not hard to feel the tragic undertone of Stieglitz's unswerving gaze on the modern metropolis.[12]

9. Mike Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn. Symbolist Photographer, 1882–1966* (New York: Aperture, 1986), p. 42.

10. Alfred Stieglitz, "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," *The Amateur Photographer & Photography*, Vol. 56, No. 1819 (1923), p. 255. See Kristina Wilson, "The Intimate Gallery and the *Equivalents*: Spirituality in the 1920s Work of Stieglitz," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 746–68.

11. Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set. The Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs,* Vol. 2, *1923–1937* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2002), cat. 1181–1190, 1520–1522, […].

12. See Joel Smith, "How Stieglitz Came to Photograph Cityscapes," *History of Photography*, Vol.

At the same time, between 1928 and 1931, Evans was also photographing the changing skyline of the East Side from elevated vantage points, such as the Chanin Building (fig. 377), the Chrysler Building (fig. 413) and the Graybar Building (fig. 411), often looking east toward Third Avenue. In about 1929, he photographed the same area in the opposite direction, looking southwest from a building next to the East River, possibly on 49th Street (fig. 414), showing a group of new towers in construction between Second and Third Avenues, including the so-called Beaux Arts Apartments designed by Kenneth M. Murcison and Raymond Hood. Interestingly, these views show the new lofts emerging from, and almost floating above, the homogenous fabric of the older city of five-story tenements, while at the same time they conceal the streets and the ordinary life of the city below.

This new urbanscape of the East Side, determined by the instantaneous growth of tall structures in a neighborhood that had not changed dramatically, was at the center of the debate in the real estate page of the New York Times and in architectural circles.[13] Erich Mendelsohn had depicted the same area in a photograph from the Paramount Building published in *Amerika*, noticing the quick and radical transformation of the entire neighborhood as a consequence of setback regulations and of the high density allowed for these buildings.[14] Similar issues were discussed in connection with another view, taken from the roof of the Pennsylvania Hotel on Seventh Avenue, showing the banal repetition of architectural types generated by the same building and economic rules "the effect of uniform expression of the architectural type."[15] Yet, according to Mendelsohn, under the apparent chaos of unregulated growth it was possible to detect the first elements of a new urban form, based on an effect of unity rather than on the emergence of individual skyscrapers competing against each other.

20, No. 4 (Winter 1996), pp. 320–31.

13. "New Industrial Centre on Manhattan's East Side," *New York Times*, October 20, 1929, p. RE1.

14. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 200–1 (photograph by Erich Karweik).

15. Ibid., pp. 212–13 ("die Wirkung zum uniformen Ausdruck des Typs").

The individualism of the skyscraper and its emergence atop a sea of lower buildings is a recurring theme in a significant series of photographs that Evans took from a particular observatory in the downtown area, the Henry L. Doherty Company Building, a brokerage business located at 62–67 Pine Street where he had just begun to work as a part-time clerk.[16] From here, in December 1928, shortly after he began to record the changing skyline of Manhattan from the Brooklyn Bridge, Evans photographed a new skyscraper under construction near the financial area, at the intersection of John, Cliff and Pearl Streets (figs. 90, 92). Evans's two photographs show the 26-story 111 John Street Building near completion, rising above the city fabric to reach the height of the nearby smokestacks of the New York Steam Company Plant. Considering the alignment of Pearl Street in the bottom section of the pictures, it appears that both photographs were taken from a northern window of the Doherty Building.

A careful cross-analysis of contemporary maps, drawings, and architectural photographs demonstrates that several images by Evans, heretofore considered only individually and for their formal qualities, were all taken from the Doherty Building as part of a continuous program of visualization of the new skyscrapers in Downtown Manhattan. From this privileged observatory, Evans was able to chronicle the emergence of a new generation of modernist buildings that changed the face of the financial district. At the same time, he experimented with various formal solutions, progressively erasing the identity of single skyscrapers in order to construct the cumulative image of a repetitive and alienating metropolis.

The photographs of 111 John Street represent only one way – perhaps the most traditional – of visualizing the city from above. By contrasting the skyscraper under construction with the older power plant, Evans staged a competition between the characteristic symbol of 19th-century industrialism and the new rational structure of the

16. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 69, 77.

financial city, not unlike Alfred Stieglitz's opposition of history and present, high and low, grid and mass, in *Old and New New York* (1910).

In 1929, looking west from the Doherty offices, Evans photographed the 38-story Chase National Bank Building recently built at 18 Pine Street (figs. 94, 95). In stereotyped photographs and drawings of the time, the Chase National Bank Building was shown from street level. A preliminary etching by Peter Marcus, probably commissioned by the bank itself, depicted the building from Broad Street as a modernist double shaft towering above, and almost looking like an addition to, the Greek Revival façade of the U.S. Sub-Treasury Building.[17] This reassuring image of the bank emerging from the history of the financial district was reprinted in various publications, including an advertisement page in the *New York Times* and an article in *Architectural Record*, which also carried a highly descriptive photograph of the skyscraper in full light (figs. 96, 97).[18]

Evans, on the contrary, photographed the side of the building, avoiding the recognizable façade and privileging the composition of cubic masses and the geometrical pattern of rear windows. Pointing the camera above the congested fabric of Wall Street, he managed to establish a visual connection between the new building and the older landmarks emerging in the background, such as the Singer and Equitable buildings. In the lower part of the photographs, a cloud of white smoke, hit by the lateral light of the winter afternoon, created a chiaroscuro effect that remains rather uncommon in Evans's work, recalling instead Coburn's Pictorialist aesthetic or the romanticized vision of Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*.

17. Peter Marcus (1889–1934) was the author of *New York. The Nation's Metropolis* (New York: Brentano, 1921), illustrated with 25 charcoal drawings depicting the city's landmarks.

18. A similar illustration, by Peter Suydam, was published in *Towers of Manhattan* (New York: The New York Edison Company, 1928), n.p. See also Berenice Abbott's 1929 photograph in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (1979.678.131), showing an angle view of the Chase National Bank Building from Nassau Street with the cornice of the U.S. Sub-Treasury Building in the foreground.

Experimenting with different cameras and reframing the negatives at the time of printing, Evans further decontextualized the nominal subject of the image. Excluding the Singer Building to the right, he collapsed the rear of the Chase National Bank against the top floors of the Equitable Building looming in the shadow behind it, thus offering a unique perspective that remained barely decipherable for the average New Yorker who looked at the same buildings from street level.

While Evans's visual treatment of 111 John Street and of the Chase National Bank re-elaborated existing stereotypes of the congested city, these photographs were still based on traditional modes of pictorial composition. At around the same time, the artist began to experiment with more radical strategies of framing and decontextualization, with one view taken from the opposite side of the Doherty Building, looking down on Wall Street (fig. 71). Pointing his camera northwest toward the New York Stock Exchange, Evans transformed the canonical perspective of the street – usually hinging, geographically and symbolically, on the dark façade of Trinity Church (fig. 72) – into an unrecognizable place, a jumbled accumulation of individual structures barely contained by the frame of the picture.

To achieve this effect, Evans included buildings at various scales. The center of the picture is occupied by the addition to the New York Stock Exchange, designed by Trowbridge & Livingston and built in 1922.[19] On the far right, the National City Company Building (52 Wall Street) and, farther west, the chute of the Bank of New York & Trust Co. Building, in its final stages of construction at the end of 1928, provide a time frame for the photograph.[20] Pointing the camera downward and cropping the top and the side of the buildings, Evans obtained an effect of fragmentation typical

19. "22-Story Building for Stock Exchange," *New York Times*, February 13, 1920, p. 4; "Exchange Addition Near Completion," *New York Times*, August 8, 1922, p. 31.

20. "Moves Back to New Home. Bank of New York & Trust Co. Returns to Site Held Since 1796," *New York Times*, January 7, 1929, p. 53.

of photo-montage, an accumulation of cubical masses menacing the survival of the public space of the street at the bottom of the urban canyon.

In the late 1920s Evans continued to photograph from the same location, looking down onto the financial district and experimenting with new visual solutions. Comparison with a 1930 photograph by Percy Loomis Sperr taken from a similar vantage point indicates that the structures recorded in Evans's *New York City, Skyscrapers, Abstract detail* (fig. 109) are, in fact, the rear façade of the Downtown Association Building (28 Cedar Street) and the west side of the Fire Companies Building (80 Maiden Lane, designed by Daniel Burnham in 1911), seen from one of the northern windows of the Doherty Building. Variant prints in different collections and one negative in the Walker Evans Archive indicate that Evans photographed the same view on at least two occasions between 1928 and 1930, possibly before construction began on the site of the adjacent Doherty Building on Pearl, Pine, and Cedar Streets, which became known as 60 Wall Tower (fig. 111).[21] In this case Evans seemed to be interested in the juxtaposition of different architectural patterns. The building on the left, with its rows of chimney vents drawing geometrical lines on the rear façade, evokes a typical 19th-century European scene, as in the demolitions depicted by Henri Le Secq in 1852–1853 or, closer to Evans, in Alvin Langdon Coburn's *Roofs, Paris* (1913).[22] On the right-hand side of the photograph, the regular pattern of straight, thick columns and recessed windows indicates a tall structure of the first generation, quite similar to the Equitable Building filmed by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand in *Manhatta* (fig. 113). While Evans framed the scene and titled the photograph in ways that were clearly meant to disorient the viewer, his "abstraction" was never so radical as in the early experiments of

21. The building was actually located at 70 Pine Street. For the opening date, see "Sixty Wall Tower Ready," *New York Times*, April 30, 1932, p. 28.

22. On Le Secq, see Eugenia Parry Janis, "Demolition Picturesque: Photographs of Paris in 1852 and 1953 by Henri Le Secq," in *Perspectives on Photography. Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall*, edited by Peter Walch and Thomas F. Barrow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), pp. 33–66.

Paul Strand. Coupling decontextualization and detailed description, the artist seemed to have in mind the possibility of a dynamic process of interpretation of the metropolis, rather than a mere aestheticization of its disconnected fragments.

A rather isolated example of Evans's extreme formalization of the modernist skyscraper is *Wall Street Windows*, 1929, a photograph that Evans printed several times and that has raised critical issues regarding the artist's debt to European modernism at the end of the 1920s (fig. 98). This selective composition of windows and metal structures in a contrasting light is striking in the context of Evans's early work for its rigid frontality and simplified structure. Gilles Mora has used the term "abstraction" to qualify Evans's photographs of this kind, which "isolate lines and subjects from their context, creating autonomous forms." Noting that a copy of this image, reverse printed left to right, hung in the photographer's studio around 1929, he stressed its purely formalist agenda, suggesting, however, that "Evans was quick to substitute for this formalism his own concept of photography, in which the image is born of the subject itself, not of its treatment."[23]

The transactions between subject matter and formal treatment implied by this image appear to be less obvious if we read it in the framework of the New York project. Between 1929 and 1930, Evans occasionally dealt with patterns and materials, recording the textures of street pavement (figs. 664–670) or the play of light and shadow under the tracks of the elevated railway (figs. 521, 524). Two studies of a doormat, in what appears to be the lobby of a modernist building, are more articulated in their use of cast shadows and oblique perspectives, showing Evans's ability to move from the mere

23. Mora, *Walker Evans*, pp. 16 and 354, note 17. The undated photograph by Grotz showing *Wall Street Windows* in Evans's Brooklyn apartment is reproduced in Thompson and Hill, *Walker Evans at Work*, p. 65. As far as I was able to determine, the reversed version was lost; existing variants in the collections of the MoMA, Getty, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts were all printed conventionally.

recognition of decorative patterns to a more elaborate concern with issues of scale and subjectivity (figs. 671, 672).[24]

Wall Street Windows can be seen as a synthesis of these issues, in that it relies on frontality, pattern, and cast shadows (fig. 672), while at the same time implying an act of engagement on the part of the viewer (fig. 671). This act of engagement—the way in which a photograph works as a mental, rather than as a merely ocular, image—owes much to the tonal qualities and physical presence of the actual print, as well as to the viewer's willingness to engage in an act of absorption.[25] While it is tempting to consider this image (especially in reproduction) in purely geometrical terms, it is only by sidestepping the photograph's self-declared formalism that we can recapture its productive tension. On closer inspection, *Wall Street Windows* appears to be composed and printed so that the viewer can actually scan the plastered surface of the building on the opposite side of the courtyard, with its tactile qualities modulated by areas of full light and light shadow. From the point of view of an active observer, the dark, geometric shapes of the fire escape staircase can be read as forming an obtrusive structure that blocks, screens, and directs vision. Since peripheral elements of this framing device are out of focus, they suggest a sequence of receding planes that contradict the apparent planarity of the picture seen at a distance.

Evans's attempt to achieve an active tension between the perception of space and the two-dimensional geometry of the photograph may be better grasped if we compare *Wall Street Windows* with a set of three variant negatives that may have served as

24. This interpretation is reinforced by Evans's inclusion of *Abstraction, New York*, 1929 (fig. 671) in a 1930 portfolio of five photographs engaging issues of urban experience and formal representation: see Walker Evans, "Photographic Studies," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (September 1930), pp. 193–98.

25. I rely on Stephen Shore's notion of the "mental image" discussed in *The Nature of Photographs. A Primer* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2007), p. 97. For a general discussion of photographic planarity, see Éric de Chassey, *Platitudes. Une histoire de la photographie plate* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), esp. pp. 72–73.

preliminary studies (fig. 99). Here the camera, tilted upwards, produces slightly converging lines that detract from the rigid geometry of the picture and convey an effect of subjective observation, in a manner that is consonant with much of Evans's work of this period. Yet, the dark metal grate is used to create repetitive patterns across the entire picture, hindering spatial perception in favor of a graphic effect that is closer to woodcuts and engravings (fig. 104) than to straight photography.

Once more, a careful analysis of the architectural patterns recorded in these photographs and a comparison with contemporary sources indicates that *Wall Street Windows* was also taken from the Doherty Building, this time looking west toward the side wall of the National City Company Building (fig. 101). In this case, Evans's typical concealment of the distinguishing architectural features of the building is particularly telling, since the 31-story skyscraper, designed by McKim, Mead & White and completed in 1928, was strongly characterized by an incongruous Ionic temple constructed at the top of an otherwise modernist structure with a setback façade.[26]

A further level of engagement offered by this photograph is prompted by Evans's descriptive caption. For this is, among other things, a photograph of a wall, and it happens that this particular wall is located on Wall Street. Similarly to other photographs in which Evans played with titles, *Wall Street Windows* suggests a witty allegory of the new metropolis, where a toponym rooted in the city's history has now turned into a numbing experience of indifference and repetition.

This photograph, then, should be seen as an abstraction not *of* but *from* a specific geography. *Wall Street Windows* shares a strategy of erasure with many of Evans's New York photographs – the concealment of internal evidence that may help identify the place where the picture was made. To ask where precisely on Wall Street these photographs were taken, means to face the frustrating sameness of modernist architecture

26. For a chronology of this skyscraper, see "National City Co. Plans 31-Story Building," *New York Times*, February 2, 1927, p. 1; "Flag Tops National City Building," *New York Times*, December 2, 1927, p. 37; "Building Congress to Honor Workmen," *New York Times*, April 9, 1928, p. 39.

and to engage in a search of distinguishing characters that may restore our sense of orientation.

Despite the common assumption about Evans's interest in European visual culture and the artist's occasional remarks on this issue, it is hard to pinpoint a photographic predecessor of this type of approach. Modernist photographers of the time tended to rely on more dynamic compositions, especially when they treated the theme of the city: Alexander Rodchenko, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, Umbo – the most innovative photographers of the New Vision – avoided the classic frontality typical of the 19th-century in favor of dramatic angle shots that conveyed a sense of instability and newness. As Franz Roh wrote in a 1930 essay on "The Value of Photography," views from above "have the magical effect of showing the verticals at a slant, so that they take on the astronomical meaning of radia pointing to an imaginary center of the earth."[27] In Germany, perhaps only Werner Mantz and Albert Renger-Patzsch employed head-on frontality with some consistency, although mostly within the scope of architectural photography rather than in the exploration of the big city.[28]

In fact, it was mostly in the United States that these formal issues had been the subject of photographic investigations since the mid-1910s. Evans's interest in the early work of Paul Strand, for instance, may have extended beyond his stated admiration for *Blind Woman* (1916) to include the formalist compositions of linear shapes and shadows, published in the last issue of *Camera Work* in 1917. However, it is an image by the California-based photographer Johan Hagemeyer that suggests most literally the visual

27. Franz Roh, "Der Wert der Fotografie," *Hand und Maschine*, No. 1 (February 1930), pp. 219–20, transl. Joel Agee, "The Value of Photography," in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 161. Evans reviewed Franz Roh's and Jan Tsichold's *Photo Eye* in "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (October-December 1931), pp. 125–28.

28. See for example Mantz's *Apartment House, Kalkerfeld, Cologne*, 1928 (CCA PH1979:0252). Evans may have been aware of Ralph Steiner's frontal photographs of billboards of the early 1920s, such as *Lollipop* (MET 1987.1100.247) and *Always Camels* (CMA 1991.242).

background of Evans's depiction of the National City Company Building.[29] *Castles of Today* (1922), despite its evident pictorial mood, shares with *Wall Street Windows* a formalization of space based on the ambiguous conflation of perspectival diagonals and triangular shadows (fig. 103). In both photographs, depending on the viewer's focus of attention, the eye is led either to move laterally across the picture plane, or to penetrate into the spatial depth of the scene. This dialectical tension can be seen as akin to the experience of the modern city dweller in the gridlock of the metropolis. According to Peter Conrad, who has discussed this trope in the paintings of Ben Shahn, "Walls like these, in their very lack of signification, have a symbolic provenance in American art. They're the infinitudes of a negative sublimity, a pallor that appalls."[30]

In fact, Evans's response to issues of abstraction in the modern city may be related to American painting of the 1920s more than to photography. In different ways, artists like Charles Demuth, Stuart Davis, and Charles Sheeler articulated a critical discourse on the metropolis and the machine that capitalized on the aesthetic principles of post-Cubism, on photography's optical precision, and, occasionally, on the pungent irony of New York Dada. Although Evans was interested primarily in the investigation of the specific elements of photographic language – moving physically within the city's space, pointing, framing, timing – it is probable that in this strain of American modernist painting (later labeled Precisionism) he detected issues of visibility and elements of material culture similar to the ones that he was exploring photographically.

Demuth's *Business*, 1921 (fig. 107) is a case in point, both in its formal treatment of a contemporary subject and because it was exhibited in the Machine-Age Exposition of 1927.[31] Using a subtle palette derived from Italian renaissance painting, this work

29. For Evans's appreciation of *Blind Woman*, see Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 88.

30. Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City. Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 110–11.

31. *Machine-Age Exposition*, edited by Jane Heap (New York: The Little Review, 1927), p. 28. The date of Evans's return is in Evans's handwritten note, WEA 1994.250.4 (1). See also Mellow,

depicts almost photographically a calendar on a wall, onto which the shadows of industrial buildings are projected from outside the frame. Thematically, Demuth's painting addressed issues of time, order, classification, and economy in contemporary America; but at a conceptual level it can be seen as a self-mocking representation, in that the painting – the artist's own "business" – is presented as a frontal, quasi-literal reproduction of commercial signage.[32]

Wall Street Windows, like many of Evans's photographs recording signs and posters, articulates formal and conceptual problems similar to the ones raised by Demuth. The repetition of office windows in the tall building echoes the pigeon-hole structure of the calendar in the painting, while the shadows project a sense of passing time on the abstract order of money governing the financial district. It should be remembered that Evans himself had directly experienced this alienating rhythm, working as a clerk for Henry L. Doherty's brokerage company, where the photograph was taken: "My job: at four-thirty, I have bang-up tea, at five I enter big office, no cheers. I am handed instead pkg. of bonds on which are written knames; and a list of knames [sic]. Then I match them until seven, when I begin to get hungry."[33] For Evans, as for Demuth, words (included in the picture or in the caption) served as triggers for a philosophic irony that invested the represented subject and the artwork itself.

Another painting which Evans may have considered in connection with *Wall Street Windows* is *City Walls* by Niles Spencer (fig. 106), an artist who exhibited regularly in New York at the Daniel Gallery and at the Whitney Studio Galleries between 1925 and 1930.[34] This large oil painting, made in 1921, was reproduced in a July 1930 article by

Walker Evans, p. 60.

32. See Connor, *Democratic Visions*, pp. 145 ff.

33. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, February 1929, quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 92.

34. Richard B. Freeman, *Niles Spencer* (The University of Kentucky, 1965), p. 15; Karal Ann Marling and Wendy Jeffers, *Niles Spencer* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990); Gail Stavitsky, Handy Ellen, Miles Orvell et al., *Precisionism in America, 1915–1941. Reordering Reality* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with The Montclair Art Museum, 1994), pp. 109, 130, 139.

art critic Marya Mannes, presenting Spencer's work in *Creative Art* – a magazine that Evans read with some regularity and that, a few months later, would publish a substantial portfolio of his photographs.[35]

Although it is uncertain whether Evans was aware of Spencer's painting before he took the final version of *Wall Street Windows*, the monochrome reproduction of *City Walls* in *Creative Art* underscores interesting similarities with the photograph in its treatment of space and abstraction. In both instances, the modulation of light and shadow and the superimposition of geometrical elements lead the viewer's eye through the receding planes of the image toward the facing wall, which returns the gaze with its vaguely anthropomorphic windows.

Despite the similarities, Spencer's representation of the city was more empathic than Evans's or Demuth's. In 1927, an anonymous reviewer of the *New York Times* who lamented the inhospitable atmosphere of his earlier works for their "breathless sky [and] hopeless bound land," saluted the "emotional relief" offered by *City Walls*: "The flat walls have life, and their angular shapes in relation to each other are beautiful."[36] While Spencer's painting is definitely subtler than *Wall Street Windows* in its articulation of grey, white, and ochre tonalities, and less assertive in its elaborate combination of planes, Evans may have agreed with Mannes's evaluation of this painting as "the result of intense concentration, a ruthless cutting-out of inessentials and, most important of all, a truly fervent spirit" – an observation that approximates Gilles Mora's appreciation of Evans's own "power to strip away superfluities."[37]

Despite these implications, *Wall Street Windows* is an exception in the context of Evans's visualization of Manhattan. In exhibitions and publications the artist favored sequential readings of the city rather than iconic photographs acting as metaphors or

35. M[arya] Mannes, "Niles Spencer, Painter of Simplicities," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (July 1930), pp. 59–61; Morris Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," p. 27, note 76.

36. "Modern Artists Show Work at Provincetown," *New York Times*, July 10, 1927, Section 7, p. 9.

37. Mannes, "Niles Spencer, Painter of Simplicities," p. 59; Mora, *Walker Evans*, p. 16.

allegories, and it is significant that although a print of this "abstraction" hung in Evans's apartment in the early 1930s, it was never included in the portfolios that he presented in public. It is possible that for the artist *Wall Street Windows* had a more personal significance than other photographs, as a record and a sublimation of a personal experience at the heart of American capitalism. While the record was inherent in the photographic document and was inscribed in its caption, the sublimation can only be inferred from the mental images of Wall Street that circulated in the public discourse of the time. *Wall Street Windows* was, perhaps, a polemical response to the futuristic city of Hugh Ferriss and Raymond Hood.

It is also possible, however, that in the initial period of his photographic activity Evans relied on specific literary sources to identify the subjects of his metropolitan explorations. It is not unlikely, for instance, that he was aware of *The Office*, a book by the an American-Jewish writer Nathan Asch that in 1924 and 1925 was excerpted in the little magazines that he read with regularity. In the opening lines of the first chapter, "Wall Street," Asch presented the city in a staccato that evokes Evans's movement from the top of the Doherty Building to the office where he used to work: "New York – downtown – streets – buildings – firms."[38] A few lines from Chapter Three are also worth quoting, as a running commentary to Evans's condensed gaze from the window of his room on Wall Street:

> The office is on a certain floor of a tall building downtown.
> The office consists of three rooms: one large, one small, and a third cut into smaller cubicles.

38. Nathan Asch, *The Office* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925; London: Holden, 1926), p. 9. In the mid-1920s Asch was an American expatriate living in Paris. A friend of Malcolm Cowley, Ernest Hemingway, Ford Madox Ford, and Hart Crane, he was also the author of *Pay Day* (New York: Brewer & Warren, Payson & Clarke, 1930), a one-day novel set in New York in the style of John Dos Passos. See "Nathan Asch," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 4, *American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939*, edited by Karen Lane Rood (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1980), pp. 14–15.

> [...]
> The office occupies all of its employees' attention.
> The office is the scene of all of its employees' ambitions.
> The office is the scene of all of its employees' hopes.[39]

After the initial chapters devoted to the description of the city's environment, the novel is set into motion when bankruptcy occurs, suddenly and without explanation, affecting the lives of all the characters in the office – the clerk, the senior partner, the stenographer, the bookkepers, the company owner. As the anonymous reviewer of the *New York Times* remarked, Asch described the reactions to failure with "satirical ferocity."[40] Evans was equally bitter about the mediocrity of commercialism: as he recalled,

> America was big business and I wanted to escape. It nauseated me. My photography was a semi-conscious reaction against right-thinking and optimism; it was an attack on the establishment.[41]

The literary expression of his discontent is recorded in an undated manuscript written by Evans at the end of the 1920s, similar in style to the first part of *The Office* and related thematically to *Wall Street Windows*. In a series of five compositions, apparently improvised in the form of prose poems, Evans superimposed modern architecture and individual stories – the "punctured cubes / full of stenographers desires banalities"

39. Ibid., p. 24. Evans may have read excerpts of the book such as "The Voice of the Office," *transatlantic review*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (June 1924), pp. 414–20 or "The Office," *The Little Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 1925), pp. 17–18.

40. "Pungent Satire in a New Novel of Wall Street Life," *New York Times Book Review*, October 11, 1925, p. 8.

41. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 84.

– with his own eye and voice. Two of the poems are particularly interesting as counterpoints to Evans's photographs of Manhattan:

cross
check
cube yourselves
black and white in the sun
it is nothing to me that you are a grain elevator
your wires carry another word
to my eye[42]

Despite their dryness, the initial lines of the composition sketch a geometric pattern that remains inert even if illuminated by a natural light ("black and white in the sun") and anthropomorphized ("yourselves"). In the second part, the narrator brings a subjective note to the scene: at the very moment when the abstract geometry of the city becomes recognizable ("a grain elevator"), it is also negated by his indifference ("nothing to me"). Significantly for Evans, the relationship between the observer and the city is established by lines that reach his eye, although unspecified words rather than images travel along this path.

The composition on the verso of the same sheet is more traditional in its narrative structure. The the narrator manifests his detachment even more forcefully in the first line, but the reader is rapidly situated in the safe position of the distant observer who can command the scene from a privileged vantage point. In the darkness of night, the "tragedies," "mysteries," and "dramas" taking place in the rooms of the "puctured cubes" can be counted, if not told, thus turning the "filthy" skyscraper into a modern panopticon:

42. WEA 1994.250.4 (7), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 71.

> To hell with the filthy punctured cubes of the
> ~~metropolis~~ city – architecturally speaking. Fourteen
> thousand two hundred *and* seventy three tragedies,
> 6 7 2 8 4 mysteries, several obscure dramas
> with or without poetry there in the night.[43]

These ruptured words echo the first lines of *The Office*, just as they appear to be influenced by the opening of an early poem by William Carlos Williams included in his 1923 book, *Spring and All*:

> Somebody dies every four minutes
> in New York State –
>
> To hell with you and your poetry –
> You will rot and be blown
> through the next solar system
> with the rest of the gases –
>
> What the hell do you know about it?[44]

43. Ibid., *verso* (the word "metropolis" is striked out in the original manuscript). For a precedent, see the first verses of "The Eye Moment," a poem by the painter Max Weber: "Cubes, cubes, cubes, cubes, / High, low, and high, and higher, higher, / Far, far out, out, out, far, / Planes, planes, planes, / Eyes, eyes, window eyes, eyes, eyes": *Cubist Poems* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914), p. 11. Weber's book was published with financial support from Alvin Langdon Coburn, to whom it was dedicated: *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer. An Autobiography,* edited by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), p. 92.

44. William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (Dijon: Contact, 1923), reprinted in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I, 1909–1939*, edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), pp. 231–32.

Evans's early verses mirror the skepticism of younger intellectuals like Malcolm Cowley, who in a chapter of *Exile's Return* entitled "The City of Anger" wrote: "I sometimes had pleasant nightmares in which I fancied that New York was being destroyed by an earthquake: its towers snapped like pine trees in a storm, a tidal wave poured through its streets and swept them clean of lice."[45]

The financial district was not the only neighborhood affected by change in the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1931, the Grand Central area more than doubled the amount of office space, owing to the construction of large structures like the Graybar Building on 42nd Street at Park Avenue, the Salmon Tower across from Bryant Park, the Lincoln Building between Park and Madison Avenue, the Chanin and Chrysler Buildings on Lexington Avenue, and 500 Fifth Avenue.46 These new structures were often discussed in the news: often depicted by commercial photographers from a high vantage point in the East 30s, they seemed to form a coherent scheme, a sequence of individual towers lined up on 42nd Street that recalled the skyline of an Italian walled town.[47]

Evans took several photographs in this area, generally photographing from the Chanin, the Chrysler, or the Graybar Building. A photograph by Paul Grotz, probably taken in August 1929, shows Evans perched on top of the Chanin Building for a shooting session on the adjoining Chrysler Building under completion.[48] Contrary to his habit, Evans took a total of about fifty photographs of the new skyscraper, probably returning on various occasions to experiment with different vantage points and types

45. Malcom Cowley, *Exile's Return. A Narrative of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1934), p. 212.

46. For a chronology of the new buildings erected in this area from 1925 to 1931, see "Rapid Expansion in Central Zone," *New York Times*, May 10, 1931, p. RE1.

47. "Lofty Buildings Give Manhattan New Skyline Effects," *New York Times*, October 6, 1929, p. RE1.

48. A copy of Grotz's photograph is in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. See also Jerry L. Thompson and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 73.

of light (figs. 371–375). Looking down at the Chrysler from a higher vantage point, he focused on two aspects of the construction process: the steel frame still visible in the upper part of the skyscraper before the completion of the brick cladding, and the massive body of its base, depicted as gigantic cubicle erupting from the street. Possibly upon Grotz's request, or following his suggestion, Evans used a large format camera to obtain detached, almost technical records of the building's phases of construction, with occasional little figures of workers visible in the maze of steel girders. Unlike most photographers of the time, such as Margaret Bourke-White, Evans never photographed the Chrysler Building from street level.[49] Significantly, in 1931 he polemicized against the "Chrysler period" – which he saw as the corrupting background of Steichen's commercial photography – implicitly identifying the evils of an entire epoch with the hubris of big business and of the automobile industry.[50]

Some of the photographs taken from the Chanin building were made pointing the camera downward at the base of the Chrysler, showing the intersection of Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street with some hints of life going on at the bottom of the urban canyon.[51] In November 1929, two photographs by Ira W. Martin, strikingly similar to these views, were published in *Vanity Fair* (fig. 374).[52] As in the case of Sperr's photo-

49. The unsigned article by Archibald MacLeish, "Skyscrapers," *Fortune*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 1930), pp. 33–37, was illustrated, among others, by two photographs by Margaret Bourke-White illustrate (p. 36). The article was preceded by her full-page photograph of the Chrysler Building's finial under construction: "Toward the Sun," ibid., p. 32.

50. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 127.

51. For an early treatment of this theme, see the two ironic drawings by William Bolin illustrating "1776 – Courtship Then and Now – 1926," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (July 1926), p. 59. A further example is the photograph by Charles Ogle illustrating "Aerial Sculpture; or From Flagpole to Street," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (June 1929), p. 69 and Ralph B. Bencker, "The Ayer Building, Philadelphia," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (October 1929), p. 437.

52. Martin's photographs, although graphically interrelated on the facing pages of the magazine, illustrate two distinct articles: "More Topless Towers for New York" and Harold Nicoloson "The Importance of Luxury," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (November 1929), pp. 86 and 87 respectively.

graphs, it is difficult to determine the reason behind this similarity. Looking carefully at the two images by Martin and at Evans's variants, it appears that both photographers returned to depict the Chrysler at different times, Evans at an earlier stage of construction than Martin, and in any case *before* the publication of *Vanity Fair*. Whether Evans worked independently from Martin or collaborated with him remains open to speculation. While Douglas Eklund, the most knowledgeable scholar of Evans's early work, has suggested a mere coincidence, strong similarities between images by Evans and architectural photographs published in the early 1930s can be found in other instances as well.[53] In May 1931, an essay by Frank Lloyd Wright on "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper" published in *Creative Art* was accompanied by a view of the Graybar Building that Evans had taken from the Chrysler Building (fig. 380).[54] Designed by Sloan & Robertson in 1927, the Graybar Building was home of the Condé Nast publishing company and was widely discussed in architectural magazines as the largest office building in New York.[55] Evans's photograph was part of a series of at least seven negatives he had made looking down from a rather uncommon vantage point on a high floor of Chrysler Building, depicting the skyscraper as an accumulation of massive setbacks sculpted by the sunlight. In 1929, a very similar photograph by Ewing Galloway had been published in the German magazine *Scherl's*.[56] In January 1930, the same image appeared in the *New York Times* to accompany an article on the riveters of New York "strolling on the thin edge of nothingness," and subsequently in advertising

53. Eklund, "Exile's Return," p. 36.

54. Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper," *Creative Art*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (May 1931), p. 324. Wright's article was an anticipation of his *Modern Architecture: Being the Kahn Lectures for 1930* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1931). Subsequently, Evans's photograph was used to illustrate the dustjacket of Rose Marian's *Bonds Without Safety* (New York: New Republic, Inc., 1932).

55. See for example "Vanity Fair's New Home – The Graybar Building," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 1927) p. 77, illustrated with a drawing by Hugh Ferriss.

56. "Wohnschluchten der Weltstadt [Residential canyons in the world city]," *Scherl's Magazin*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (November 1929), p. 1240.

campaigns in America and abroad (figs. 381–383).[57] Again, lacking further documents on Evans's commercial work it is difficult to explain these similarities. In any case, occasional remarks he made in his letters to Hanns Skolle attests that by 1930 he was actively trying to sell his work through photographic agencies, while his publications from that period indicate that he had developed promising connections with magazines dealing with contemporary architecture.[58]

An episode that occurred in 1930, however, shows that Evans was extremely aware of the value of his New York project. In the spring, one of the photographs of the Chrysler Building and a general view of Midtown taken from the Fred F. French Building were included in a pictorial book on modern architecture edited by the Belgian art critic Maurice Casteels (figs. 371, 468). Originally published in Germany as *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst* (The objectivity in modern art), the book was translated into French as *L'art modern primitif* (Primitive modern art) and subsequently into English as *The New Style. Architecture and Decorative Design*.[59] The volume was a collection of architectural photographs printed full-page on matte paper, covering recent trends in Europe and the United States and organized in a loose thematic order rather than geographically. Evans's two photographs, reproduced quite apart in the book, were shown

57. C[harles] G. Poore, "The Riveters' Panorama of New York," *New York Times* (January 5, 1930), p. SM5; "Comfort Can Go Sky-high," advertisement page for Armstrong's Corkboard Insulation, *Architectural Record*, Vol. 68, No. 6 (December 1930), p. 22; "Singles Them Out," advertisement page for Kimberly-Clark Corporation, *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (May 13, 1931), n.p.

58. See letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, June 19, 1930 (WEA 1994.260.25 [29]), reproduced in Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 147.

59. Maurice Casteels, *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst* (Paris and Leipzig, Jonquières, 1930), pp. 14, 87. See also *L'art moderne primitif* (Paris: Les Éditions Henri Jonquières, 1930); *The New Style. Architecture and Decorative Design. A Survey of Its First Phase in Europe and America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931). The book was introduced by the Belgian Flemish artist, architect, and theorist Henry van de Velde. For reviews of the book, see H[enry] I. Brock, "Architectural Books," *New York Times Book Review*, November 15, 1931, p. 14 and M[artin] S. Briggs, "The Young Idea in Architecture," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs,* Vol. 60, No. 348 (March 1932), pp. 165–66. In the book, the Chrysler Building was illustrated with a photograph by Berenice Abbott (p. 88).

as generic examples of the lack of planning in contemporary American urbanism. In the brief notes preceding the plates, the Chrysler Building (misspelled "Chrystle" in the list of tables of the original German edition) was presented as an example of the skyscraper's derivation from the ancient pyramids; Evans's bird's-eye view looking northwest from the Fred F. French Building, titled Manhattan, was dubbed "a chaos of hyperbolic consequences."[60]

Like many European commentators before him, including Le Corbusier, Casteels looked at America as a cauldron in which unplanned forces were giving birth to an ebullient metropolis. In 1924, he had published an article in the Belgian magazine *7 Arts* entitled "Villes et forces modernes," in which he celebrated the sounds, smells, and sights of the modern city.[61] In *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst*, however, the bustling metropolis was equated to mere disorder, and the skyscraper was considered acceptable only as far as it could be harnessed by the framework of a city plan. A photograph of New York included in the book, by Berenice Abbott, depicted the Chanin, Chrysler and Daily News Buildings (the latter two under construction), looking west on 42nd Street. According to Casteels, skyscrapers such these were welcome as long as they could be built with enough public space surrounding them.[62]

The inclusion in the book of Evans's and Abbott's photographs was not a coincidence. Even after she returned to New York in 1929, Berenice Abbott maintained

60. Casteels, *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst*, pp. II, X.

61. Maurice Casteels, "Villes et formes modernes," *7 Arts. Journal Hebdomadaire d'Information et de Critique* (1924), quoted in An Paenhuysen, "A Road Story of the Belgian Avant-Garde," in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism. Belgian Modernity in the Making*, edited by Nathalie Aubert, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Patrick McGuinness (London: Legenda, 2007), pp. 128–41 (quotation p. 135). On Maurice Casteels (1890–1962) and the magazine *7 Arts*, see also Serge Goyens de Heusch, *7 Arts. Bruxelles 1922–1929. Un front de jeunesse pour la révolution artistique* (Bruxelles: Editions Ministère de la Culture, 1976).

62. Casteels, *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst*, p. X and pl. 88. Abbott's view of 42nd Street followed immediately on the next page after Evans's photograph from the Fred F. French Building.

intense professional contacts with publishers and curators in Europe.[63] In 1930 Henri Jonquières, the publisher of *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst*, also printed *Atget, Photographe de Paris*, based on the photographs that Abbott selected from the archive that she had purchased in Paris after Atget's death.[64] It was through Abbott that Evans's two photographs were included in the Casteels book. Probably it was also on account of her efforts that around the same time his work was featured in the Munich *Internationale Ausstellung das Lichtbild*, receiving a one-person review in the French magazine *La revue moderne illustrée des arts et de la vie*.[65] And yet Evans, writing to Skolle in June 1930, complained bitterly about Abbott's agency, possibly due to economic reasons: "Berenice Abbott let a French publisher have some of my best photographs for a book and I am furious because it is a total loss all around and I am going to try to cable nothing doing; all this is very tough on my Knerves [sic]."[66]

Evans's defense of his "best photographs" is quite interesting, being one of the rare statements about his urban explorations that he made at that time. That it was not meant solely in terms of their saleability is suggested by the central role played by these

63. Peter Barr, *Becoming Documentary. Berenice Abbott's Photographs, 1925–1939*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 1997, p. 60.

64. Ibid., pp. 140–41. *Atget, Photographe de Paris*, was published in November with an introduction by Pierre Mac Orlan (Paris: Henri Jonquières, 1930). Like Casteels's book, it was also published in the United States (New York: E. Weyhe Gallery, 1930, with Mac Orlan's text) and in Germany as *Eugene Atget: Lichtbilder* (Leipzig: Jonquières, 1930, text by Camille Recht). See also *Eugène Atget. Photographe de Paris* (New York: Errata Editions, 2008).

65. C. De Cordis, "La photographie artistique. Walker Evans," *La revue moderne illustrée des arts et de la vie*, Vol. 30, No. 21 (November 15, 1930), pp. 24-25.

66. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, June 19, 1930. This episode seems to mark the beginning of Evans's distancing from Berenice Abbott and her work. Recent attempts to consider their documentary projects side by side have failed to consider that while they were both developing photographic projects on New York around this time, their personal connections and professional paths were abruptly severed sometime in the early 1930s. See for example Sharon Corwin, Jessica May, Terri Weissman, *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

images (especially those of the Chrysler Building) in a significant series of 36 photographs that he planned to send "to Russia with W. Goldwater" around 1933.[67]

That in 1929 Evans had more than a superficial interest in depicting New York's skyscrapers from above is indicated as well by a second series that he took from the Chanin Building, looking west toward the Lefcourt Colonial Building (295 Madison Avenue at 41st street), 10 East 40th Street, and the Lincoln Building, all under construction at that time (figs. 358–360). Using the same equipment as in the Chrysler photographs, including a professional 5 × 7-inch camera, Evans took no less than 11 photographs on two different expeditions, trying different solutions with framing and composition. In all cases, Evans studied the relationship between the skyscrapers dislocated on the city grid, privileging the Lincoln Building and the Lefcourt Colonial. As with the Chrysler, he generally tilted the camera downward, thus eschewing the linear style generally used by professional architectural photographers.

In 1929 and 1930, Evans continued to explore New York from tall buildings in various sections of the city. The second photograph included in Casteels's book, as we have seen, was taken from the Fred F. French Building, looking northwest toward the setback structures that formed the fabric of the east 40s. Evans took at least five photographs from the same vantage point, shifting his attention from the industrial buildings to Fifth Avenue, and including in one photograph the Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas under renovation at 48th Street (figs. 467–469).

Also from the French Building, Evans took one of his most vertiginous photographs, looking straight down from a window to include one of the building's terraces and the polygonal shadow of the skyscraper itself projected on the avenue below (fig.

67. In his later years, however, after his retrospective exhibition of 1971, he would offer a different view on those very photographs of the Chrysler Building: "I took pictures during that first burst of rebuilding in New York. The skeleton of the Chrysler Building going up and a few things like that. But it's not really my subject." See James R. Mellow, "Walker Evans Captures the Unvarnished Truth," *New York Times*, December 1, 1974, pp. 38.

471). Curiously again, an almost exact copy of this photograph, possibly taken from a lower window of the same building, was reproduced in a 1929 book on Midtown Manhattan commissioned by the Forty-Second Street Property Owners and Merchants Association (fig. 472).[68]

Photographs of this kind, inaugurated by European photographers such as László Moholy-Nagy and Umbo, by the end of the decade had become a recognizable genre in American illustrated magazines. In 1923, Lewis Mumford, an acute observer of New York's changing environment, had criticized an article by Charles Downing Lay published in *The Arts*, illustrated with photographs by Charles Sheeler, with the following remarks:

> What our critics have learned to admire in our great buildings is their photographs – and that is another story. In an article chiefly devoted to praise of the skyscraper, in a number of *The Arts*, the majority of the illustrations were taken from a point that the man in the street never reaches. In short, it is an architecture, not for men, but for angels and aviators.[69]

By 1930, the politically charged iconography of the New Vision had become a familiar staple in American mass magazines. In February, *Vanity Fair* carried two zenithal photographs showing the traffic of cars and people going downtown on Fifth Avenue in

68. Martin Clary, *Mid-Manhattan. The Multimillion Area* (New York: Forty-Second Street Property Owners and Merchants Association, Inc., 1929), p. 204. The photograph, credited to World Wide Photos, showed a group of dancers rehearsing on the set-back roof of the Fred F. French Building.

69. Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), p. 174, quoted in Teresa A. Carbone, "Silent Pictures: Encounters with a Remade World," in *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*, edited by Teresa A. Carbone (New York: Skira/Rizzoli; Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2011), p. 140. See Charles Downing Lay, "New Architecture in New York," *The Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (August 1923), pp. 67–70.

the morning, and rushing uptown on Seventh Avenue at dusk.[70] In June, an article on the economy of the fashion industry in *Fortune* magazine was illustrated with a photograph by Margaret Bourke-White showing 36th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues, "closed to traffic at noon, crowded with jabbering, gesticulating men."[71] Similar strategies can be seen at work in a 1931 advertising campaign for the Fifth Avenue Building (Maynicke & Franke, 1909–1910) on Broadway at Madison Square, across the street from the Flatiron Building.[72] With a radical change from previous campaigns based on a street-level depiction of the massive, renaissance-style building occupying the entire block between 23rd and 24th Streets, the new advertisements were illustrated with oblique photographs taken from the top of the Flatiron Building, showing the base of the Fifth Avenue Building and the traffic of automobiles and people on Madison Square. Compared to the previous iconography celebrating the building's exclusive elegance, the stress was now put on the advantages of its location at the intersection of New York's major thoroughfares, "always thronged with people and with traffic."[73]

Occasionally, Evans also paid homage to this genre, possibly referencing the architectural debate on urban public spaces started by Mumford and carried out in Mendelsohn's *Amerika*. One such instance is provided by a photograph showing the lower floors of the Times Building looking down from the Paramount Building, an image so similar to one of Mendelsohn's snapshots to suggest a direct quotation (figs. 444–445). In *Amerika*, the quasi-zenithal view of Times Square was preceded by an

70. "Scenes in New York Streets," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (February 1930), pp. 30–31. One of the two photographs was attributed to "Zilliac," probably E. George Zilliac (1905–1999), a visual artist and writer originally from Toronto who studied lithography with Joseph Pennell and collaborated with the *New Masses* and *Vanity Fair*. For a biographical skecth, see *Story*, Vol. 5, No. 24 (July 1934), p. 2.

71. "Cloak and Suit," *Fortune*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (June 1930), p. 97. Bourke-White was not credited in the magazine.

72. See, for example, the advertisement campaigns in *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 147, No. 1 (January 1931), p. 2 and *National Geographic Magazine,* Vol. 59, No. 3 (February 1931), p. 3.

73. Ibid.

aerial view of the Times Building, part of a series devoted to triangular structures that included also the German-American Insurance Company Building, at the intersection of Maiden Lane and Liberty Street (Hill & Stout, 1907). Mendelsohn, always aware of the social and economic implications of architectural design, noted that while these buildings were designed to maximize real estate income, the *Times* had the extra power to "direct the public: traffic as well as opinions."[74] Evans's variant photograph was probably based on this precedent, but instead of showing the entire shaft of the Times Building it concentrated the viewer's attention on the open space of the square, organized in purely functional terms to serve the needs of private and public transportation.

In other instances, Evans explored formal solutions of the zenithal view that were in tune with similar studies conducted by painters, as we have seen with Niles Spencer's and Charles Demuth's works from this period. This is the case of a series of six 35mm negatives taken from the Manhattan Bridge, pointing the camera downward at the intersection of Front and Adams Streets in Brooklyn (fig. 558). As in the photograph of Times Square, Evans seemed attracted by the negative space created by the proximity of individual structures. The glaring light emanating from the center of the picture is delimited by a static triangular shape formed by the adjoining buildings, a cast shadow, and a portion of the bridge; at the same time, the lines forming this graphic structure act like centrifugal vectors that expand into an apparently inconsistent space, with the dark six-story tenement rising to the left, the two-story warehouse continuing under the bridge on the top right, and the bridge itself above everything. The formal problems implied by this scene were first explored by Paul Strand in 1916–1917 with a series of photographs that utilized the same choice of vantage point and selective framing to convey a modern feeling of metropolitan fragmentation (fig. 130). As we will see, Evans on a number of occasions experimented with the composition of heterogeneous urban materials, creating images with baffling spatial ambiguities (fig. 671). Here, however,

74. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 42 (photograph by Karweik).

careful choice of light and accurate framing coalesced into an expressive image that synthesized the superficial as well as the volumetric aspects of the city. The raking light allowed Evans to convey the full tactile quality of the street pavement at the center of the scene, rendered with such cleanness and precision as to become an abstract pattern. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the deep shadows in the upper and left areas of the photograph suffused the geometry of the city in a timeless atmosphere. Finally, it was in the sidewalk littered with urban debris, in the formless spots, in the variations of grey dirt, that the time of the city could be felt, an accidental accumulation of signs in the interstices between geometry and nature. It was a detail that echoed the unsung stories of Atget's back alleys as well as the "purely cerebral yet material" condition of Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* (1920).[75] A 1919 poem by Maxwell Bodenheim, entitled "Advice to a Street-Pavement," fully expresses the urban character of Evans's perception:

> Lacerated grey has bitten
> Into your shapeless humility.
> Little episodes of roving
> Strew their hieroglyphics on your muteness.
> Life has given you heavy stains
> Like an ointment growing stale.
> Endless feet tap over you
> With a maniac insistence.
>
> O unresisting street-pavement,
> Keep your passive insolence

75. I am reverting a remark reportedly made by Man Ray about Duchamp's *Large Glass*, the nominal subject of *Dust Breeding*: see Maria Morris Hambourg, "Photography Between the Wars: Selections from the Ford Motor Company Collection," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 6.

At the dwarfs who scorn you with their feet.
Only one who lies upon his back
Can disregard the stars.[76]

The inclusion of a minor event hinting at the time of the city is also the characteristic of a photograph titled *Traffic*, taken in 1929 (fig. 567).[77] Looking down at the Borough Hall subway entrance in Brooklyn from the platform of the elevated station, Evans recorded the flows of motor vehicles and passersby separated by a series of traffic bollards lined up diagonally across the picture. Again, the dynamic arrangement shows an influence of the New Vision or, considering the strong sunlight, an image with Surrealistic undertones such as Otto Umbehr's *Mystery of the Street* (1928) (fig. 572). For the final version, published in *Hound & Horn* as part of a four-page portfolio, Evans reframed the original negative, cropping a significant portion of the truck to the right. In this way he underscored the graphic construction of the scene and redirected the viewer's attention toward the man to the left holding his hat. Generally reluctant to exploit the anecdotal possibilities of the snapshot, in this instance Evans recorded a common gesture, as if the man was caught in the act of greeting an unseen person driving the car in front of him. Yet, considering the number of photographs Evans devoted to junked automobiles in his early period of work, it is not unlikely that he saw this scene as a metaphorical salute to the Ford car and to the traffic it engendered in the geometrical city. On the other hand, the raised hat, perfectly aligned with the sequence of hat-shaped traffic separators, suggests even further associations with avant-garde photographs of the late 1920s, such as the one reproduced on the cover of the influential book

76. Maxwell Bodenheim, *Advice: A Book of Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), p. 13. The poem had already been published in *The Little Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 1919), p. 25.

77. Walker Evans, "New York City," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October-December 1930), following p. 42.

Es kommt der neue Fotograf!, published in 1929 (fig. 573).[78] The transformative power of unexpected vantage points was not unknown to Evans, who took similar photographs from a station of the elevated line in October 1928, focusing on the organic shape of a man's hat (figs. 570, 571). As in the zenithal view from the Manhattan Bridge, he relied on intense, direct sunlight to record the almost tactile quality of various urban materials, including patterns of concrete, asphalt, bricks, a manhole, a metal grill. Once again, the influence of Paul Strand's experiments of the mid-1910s – one may think of *From the El*, 1915 (fig. 568) – can be detected in the combination of vantage point, cast shadows, and human figures. But more poignantly, as in the fantasies of Surrealist photographers like Brassaï and André Kertész, the horizontal light cutting across the scene transformed the street into a stage set, passersby into mysterious characters, and the man's hat into an involuntary sculpture.[79] Exploiting precisely this visual trope, five years later Man Ray made a series of photographs of hatted heads seen from above, typically charged with a strong sexual undertone (fig. 575).

3.2 Skyscraper city: the view from below

The elevated views of New York that we have considered so far allow us to understand important aspects of Evans's approach to the urban environment: mostly taken in the financial district and in Midtown, they show how he tried to define an alternative

78. Werner Gräff, *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Berlin: Verlag Hermann Reckendorf, 1929). The photograph, credited to "Presse Photo, Berlin," was reproduced on the cover and on p. 19, as part of a two-page spread on the same visual theme. See also "Weihnachts-Preisrätzel – 'Die Welt von oben gesehen' – Was stellen diese 6 Bilder dar?," *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, Vol. 28, No. 52 (December 28, 1919), p. 544, reproduced in Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 94.

79. See Jane Livingston and Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), pp. 36–37.

image of New York by selecting particular vantage points from the high floors of adjoining skyscrapers and, occasionally, from the Brooklyn Bridge.

Most of Evans's explorations, however, occurred at street level. To photograph the city from this perspective meant to compete with the ordinary experience of New Yorkers and with the growing iconography of popular and architectural magazines. In the second half of the 1920s, the quick pace of urban change fostered a debate on issues of memory and national identity that exceeded the mere opposition of progress and nostalgia. In 1929, a *New York Times* article listed a number of buildings in the financial district that were being razed to make way for new skyscrapers, including for example the Irving Trust Company Building, the Bank of Manhattan Building, and 120 Wall Street. As the anonymous writer remarked, the new Bank of New York and Trust Company Building was planned to occupy "the same site on which the Bank of New York was first opened more than a century ago and also the site of the old structure of the New York Trust Company with which it was merged."[80] During the same months, excavations for the foundations of 120 Wall Street unearthed historical artifacts dating from Colonial New York, allowing the *New York Times* to draw a line of continuity between the city's past and present commercial vocation.[81]

Also in 1929, *The Living Age* translated an essay by the German art and architectural critic Paul Fecther on the characteristic spatial values of the American landscape, titled "The failure of American architecture." A section of the article was devoted to the new percpetion of space afforded by tall buildings in New York, singling out the case of Washington Square (as William J. Brede had done two years earlier) as a turning point in the city's history. A public space originally designed according to European

80. "Razing Buildings on Wall Street," *New York Times*, May 12, 1929, p. RE1; "The Towering Skyline of Lower Manhattan Viewed from Governors Island," photograph by William Frange, *New York Times*, October 20, 1929, p. RE1.

81. "Engineers Seek Relics," *New York Times*, April 21, 1929, p. RE2; "Jug of Dutch Period Found in Wall St.," *New York Times*, June 6, 1929, p. 14; "125-Year-Old Rum Dug Up in Wall Street," *New York Times*, July 4, 1929, p. 6.

principles, Fechter observed, the square was later developed as a typically American accumulation of disproportionate tall buildings, a "confused hodgepodge" of architectural masses.[82] The article went on to detect similar contradictions in the sudden growth of the financial district, where the cramped space of a street scheme imported from European walled cities imposed the indiscriminate construction of tall buildings. The visual experience of such complex urban space could hardly be conveyed by photography: "Heavily and slowly – Fechter wrote –, these structures totter stupidly out of the range of vision, giving only an impression of more and more cement."[83] More important, the disruption of the traditional urban order was diagnosed as the metaphysical tragedy of a nation unable to provide a psychic space to its own citizens: only by returning to "the soil" and to the spatial awareness of its native culture, he concluded, could America develop an architectural style of its own.

Always reluctant to capitalize on existing stereotypes or, conversely, to exploit the imaginative possibilities of the medium, Evans developed a visual critique of the modern city that was based on a careful choice of subject matter, selective framing, and a non-linear montage of the photographic sequence. The recurring themes of Evans's street photographs can be identified with some accuracy, because he continued to explore specific subjects that he further developed in his celebrated work of the mid-1930s. Looking up from the sidewalks of New York, he continued to explore the form and the meanings of the skyscraper, often following the same principles that he employed in his bird's-eye views. At the same time, he also developed a cunning eye for specific elements of the walking city, including industrial structures, commercial signs, shop windows,

82. Paul Fechter, "The Failure of American Architecture," *The Living Age*, Vol. 28, n. 5 (November 1, 1929), pp. 274–79 (quotation p. 276). The article had originally been published in the influential Spanish magazine *Revista de Occidente,* founded by José Ortega y Gasset, as "El espacio americano," Vol. 7, No. 74 (August 1929), pp. 169–200. Fechter published the first comprehensive study on Expressionist art in 1914 and was also the author of *Die Tragödie der Architektur* (Jena: Lichtenstein, 1921).

83. Ibid., p. 278.

the city's inhabitants, and the matter of the city itself, taking details of concrete, steel, and wood objects.

Undated notes in the Walker Evans Archive offer a glimpse on the photographer's working methods. On a slip of paper, Evans noted the exact time and day for a possible study on the juxtaposition of urban subjects:

> Old Spruce restaurant
> at Gold + Spruce
> Sunday noon
> 1. straight, just Restaurant
> 2. further South, include
> Municipal tower[84]

On another list, he recorded the coordinates of a street intersection in the Lower East Side and the indication of a street front on the east side of Rivington Street that he probably deemed worthy of further exploration: "Rivington Orchard | stand s.w. and [?] | look E. | | on Rivington, near here [?] | [in] two blocks E. of Orchard | movie theatre mar[quee?]."[85] These notes suggest that Evans's power of observation functioned at many levels: as he walked in the street, he could mentally telescope from the scale of the urban landscape to minor signs of everyday life, singling out from the visual chaos of the city revealing details of contemporary civilization. It was one such detail that triggered Evans's transformative imagination: at the bottom of the handwritten note, he sketched an anthropomorphic figure, possibly a schematization of a theater

84. Undated manuscript note, WEA 1994.250.8 (7).

85. Undated manuscript note, WEA 1994.250.7 (22–25). The marquee mentioned in Evans's note may have referred to either the Waco Theatre or the Ruby Theatre on Rivington Street between Essex and Norfolk Streets. The Waco Thatre (which was abandoned by 1929) was located at 120 Rivington Street (between Essex and Norfolk Streets), while the Ruby stood on opposite side of the street, at 105–9. See NYPL 0975-A2 and NYPL 0837-B3; 0837-B2.

marquee or of an eyeglass shop sign, or a superimposition of the two. Although no corresponding photograph is present in Evans's archive, clearly his attention was attracted by the dreamlike stage crammed with painted signs of optometrist studios and optician shops on Rivington Street section between Orchard and Ludlow Streets.[86] Around the same time, these visual tropes were also the subject of photographs by Jaromír Funke (Untitled, from the series "Time Persists," 1930–1933) and Manuel Álvarez Bravo (*Parábola optica*, 1931).[87]

For his explorations, Evans used hand-held cameras that were not equipped with professional tilting lens of the kind normally employed by architectural photographers to correct perspectival distortion. Even when he had a chance to use a 6 ½ × 8 ½-inch camera with glass plates (as in the photographs of the Chrysler Building), he tended to adopt an informal style that evoked the actual experience of looking up at the city rather than the studied compositions of art photography. We can begin by looking at two distinct views of Wall Street, taken in the spring of 1930 using different cameras (and possibly on different days), that recall similar images made by other artists in the second half of the 1920s (figs. 73–74). Here the street is typically represented as an urban canyon, but also as a collage of individual buildings competing for height, with the spire of Trinity Church in the background dwarfed by the Equitable Building, the New York Stock Exchange Building and the Irving Trust Company Building towering above. Among the precedents of Evans's view are graphic works such as Arnold Rönnebeck's *Trinity Church and Wall Street*, 1925 (fig. 77) and Hanns Skolle's *Wall Street*, 1927 (fig. 78). While Skolle represented the financial district as a lively space, animated by the play of light on the buildings' façades and by the traffic of the street,

86. See, for example, NYPL 0974-F7.

87. Álvarez Bravo's *Parábola optica* was included in the 1935 exhibition *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs* (including works by Cartier-Bresson, Evans and Álvarez Bravo) at the Julien Levy gallery in New York. See the reconstruction of the exhibition in *Documentary & Anti-Graphic: Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans & Alvarez Bravo*, with essays by Agnès Sire, Daniel Girardin, Ian Jeffrey, Michel Tournier, Peter Galassi and Jeff Rosenheim (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), p. 59.

Rönnebeck offered a much bleaker image of a deserted city on the verge of implosion. Published in *Vanity Fair* in 1925, *Trinity Church and Wall Street* was meant to depict "not so much a certain familiar street hemmed in by skyscrapers, as the leaning, threatening masses of the structures themselves."[88] A few months later, *Vanity Fair* published a full-page reproduction of a second work by Rönnebeck on the same subject, *Down Town*, depicting the somber, claustrophic space of an urban canyon in the financial district caught in the last moments of sunset. It was accompanied by a poem by George S. Chappell, also entitled "Down Town," in which the flickering rays of golden light hitting the top of the skyscrapers were compared to the actual gold and stocks traded on Wall Street during the day:

> Gold!
> It is that they seek,
> The hungry crowd,
> Blatant and bawling,
> 'Putting' and 'calling',
> Shrieking and yelling,
> Buying and selling
> […]
> And men are lost … and made …
> Down town. …[89]

88. "A Foreign Artist Among New York Skyscrapers," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April 1925), p. 56. Other works reproduced on the same page included *Pershing Square-Night* ("the continually escaping volumes of which the lighted windows constitute the merest phantoms") and *Equitable Building* ("the grim uprushing of gigantic shapes, tortured by light and shade to the admission of violent and splendid mendacities"). Merrill Schleier has characterized this type of urban imagery elaborated by Rönnebeck around 1925 as a "silent, surreal nightmare," conveying an unmistakably negative reaction to the modernization of New York City (*The Skyscraper in American Art*, p. 107).

89. George S. Chappell, "Down Town. In the Banking District of New York," *Vanity Fair*, Vol.

A similar characterization of Downtown Manhattan as "the moneybag of the world" can be found in Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika,* where a rather innocent snapshot of a man strolling on Wall Street is turned into an image of doom by the dark shadows that surround the anonymous figure and by a caption underscoring the perverse cohabitation of banks, the stock exchange, and the church, allied under the dictum "money and God" (fig. 75).[90] Evans, who had worked as an office clerk in Wall Street for some time, probably shared Mendelsohn's critique of metropolitan capitalism. However, in this particular case he appeared closer to Rönnebeck in pointing the camera toward the top of the Irving Trust Company Building under construction, and eliding the animation of the street in the foreground in order to stress the disproportion between the new skyscrapers and the spire of Trinity Church.

The influence of Mendelsohn's book is patent in many photographs in which Evans depicted individual buildings seen from street level, such as the Fred F. French Building on Fifth Avenue (figs. 438–439) and the Daily New Building on 42nd Street (fig. 364). In the case of the French Building, he returned to photograph at least twice, testing different camera angles, experimenting with the effect of raking light on the setback façade, and playing with the contrast between cast shadows and reflecting windows in the lower floors of the skyscraper. Similar strategies can be seen in the work of a professional photographer like Sigurd Fischer (fig. 440) and in the visual experiments of Sherril Schell and Thurman Rotan (fig. 441). But it was probably from *Amerika* that Evans, prompted by Grotz, derived his interest for the aesthetic of setback skyscrapers. His views of the Fred F. French Building were taken from exactly the same vantage point (looking west from east 45th Street) as three photographs of the same building

24, No. 5 (July 1925), p. 58. Chappell's poem was consonant with the themes of Nathan Asch's *The Office* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925; London: Holden, 1926). Beginning in October 1926, Chappell became the architectural critic for the *New Yorker* under the pseudonym T-Square (he was succeeded in 1931 by Lewis Mumford): *Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford's Writings on New York*, edited by Robert Wojtowicz (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. 16.

90. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 72–73.

taken by Erich Karweik and published in the second edition of *Amerika* in 1928. In the book, Mendelsohn singled out the French Building, designed by H. Douglas Ives with Sloan & Robertson in 1926–1927, as an example of the tendency toward "the gigantic" in American architecture, leading to "the last stage of the skyscraper: enhancement of mass to obtain mastery over mass."[91] In Mendelsohn's opinion, however, this innovative structure represented not only a positive example of well-designed architecture, but also the nucleus of a generative process that hopefully would transform the entire city, "Bold and new enough to become, at some point in the future, the independent expression of this new life."[92]

A series of photographs taken in the early months of 1930 shows that Evans soon began to articulate more sophisticated ideas about the role of the skyscraper in the life of the city. Walking east on Wall Street and looking toward the East River, Evans experimented with the massive waterfront of the 120 Wall Street Building under completion (figs. 82, 84–85).[93] Taken again from a worm's-eye perspective, these photographs framed the entire shaft of the 34-story skyscraper designed by Ely Jacques Kahn, creating a composition of masses and surfaces that was conversant with the imagery of a number of American artists of the 1920s working in a post-Cubist style. In one photograph of the sequence, Evans approached the rear of the building against the light of the early morning, in striking opposition to the older structures in the lower foreground, illuminated by the raking rays of the sun. Accentuating the optical distortion and excluding from the view the street and the lower section of the skyscraper, he achieved the same discordant effect of a montage in which ordinary notions of scale and perspective were lost.

91. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 107 (photograph by Karweik).

92. Ibid., p. 221.

93. See Sigurd Fischer's photographs of 120 Wall Street in *Architectural Record*, Vol. 69, n. 4 (April 1931), pp. 313 ff.

At the same time, this photograph thematized the clash between the 19th-century city of the tenement and the 20th-century metropolis of the skyscraper. This type of iconography, contrasting the "old and new New York," had become a stereotype since the city's first phase of modernization in the 1890s, as testified by Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph of 1910 bearing this title. A more specific precedent of Evans's deptiction of the 120 Wall Street Building can be found in photographs like Alfred Stieglitz's *Old and New New York* (1910), Ira W. Martin's *The Dwarfs* (c. 1923) (fig. 88), or Clara E. Sipprell's *New York City, Old and New* (c. 1930) (fig. 89).[94]

Evans's photographs of 120 Wall Street appear to be conversant with this debate. In the first picture of the series, the drama of change is reinforced metaphorically by the fact that the new skyscraper is shown under construction, suggesting the menace of infinite growth.[95] However, as in almost all his photographs of tall buildings of this period, Evans was not interested in a visual chronicle of recognizable New York buildings. Taking great care to exclude from the picture the main façade of the skyscraper, he concentrated his attention on the nondescript rear wall punctuated by the repetitive grid of identical windows. Alternative views of the same period show that this theme could have been approached from more canonical vantage points, showing the building's front on South Street and its sculptural mass emerging from the Manhattan skyline (figs. 86, 87). But in conceptual and stylistic terms, Evans clearly distanced himself

94. Sipprell's *New York City, Old and New* was given to the Museum of Modern Art by Saidie A. May in 1932, the first work by a female artist to enter the museum's collection. While it is usually dated c. 1920, the extension of the International Telephone and Telegraph Building (completed in 1930) that is visible in the background suggests that the photograph addressed the dramatic change that began to affect Downtown Manhattan at the end of the decade. For Sipprell's New York photographs of this period, see Mary Kennedy McCabe, *Clara Sipprell: Pictorial Photographer* (Forth Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1990), pls. 16–19.

95. Compare this image with Margaret Bourke-White's photograph of the outside hoist of the Chrysler Building under construction, published in *Fortune* later in 1930 (fig. 376).

from the celebratory aims of professional architectural photography, while at the same time experimenting with the visual language of the New Vision.

As he moved closer toward the skyscraper, Evans progressively tilted the camera and explored the possibilities of a dynamic composition of his nominal subject based on the instability of the diagonal line. The second and third photographs in the series are perhaps the most literal examples of Evans's interest in the work of Rodchenko, who had adopted similar strategies for a series on a house on Myasnitskaya Street in Moscow a few years earlier. However, the cinematic sequence on 120 Wall Street indicates that at the end of the 1920s Evans was exploring the possibilities of formal composition less as a stylistic device than as a tool of visual problem-solving. Taken together, these pictures show how the photographer performatively reframed his initial theme – old and new New York – in the attempt to achieve a better balance between descriptive and formal exigencies.[96]

From this perspective, the final image in the series – for which a print exists in the Getty collection – can be seen as the culmination of Evans's working method rather than a mere homage to the European avant-garde (fig. 85). In it, the buildings appear as histograms measuring the city's growth in time, with a slow progression from three to five stories, followed by the dramatic change of scale and form represented by the mastodontic, potentially limitless skyscraper. The opposition between the personality and the anonymity of the modern metropolis is noted through further details registered by the photograph, such as the street signage on the façades of the buildings. In the final print, Evans cropped the original negative in order to place the commercial sign of an older building exactly at the bottom of the picture, thus creating a cacophonic

96. Garry Winogrand, decades later, adopted a similar strategy for his tilted photographs of sidewalk scenes in New York and Los Angeles. As John Szarkowski aptly observed, "the tilted frame could not only maintain a kind of discipline over the flamboyant tendencies of the wide-angle lens but could also intensify his intuited sense of his picture's meanings.": *Winogrand. Figments from the Real World* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), p. 23.

relationship between its functional, descriptive syntax – "G. and G. Mailing Service | Multigraphing | Advertising – Mailing – Folding" – and the dull repetition of "120" signs on the windows of the skyscraper.[97]

The repetition of geometrical shapes, as we have seen, was a common theme in architectural photographs of the 1920s. Presenting Charles Sheeler's and Paul Strand's film *Manhatta* in 1921, *Vanity Fair* singled out a view of the Equitable Building to underscore the city's "mechanical monotony," observing that "the photographers were interested in the monotonous repetition of windows and other utilitarian details, which give so forceful a sense of the vast scale and mechanical precision of the skyscraper."[98]

The other two photographs of the sequence show how Evans developed new visual ideas on the spot, approaching the building from the perspective of a common passer-by and framing the view so as to create a dialectical relationship between static form and dynamic perception of the city (figs. 82, 84). Overtly tilting the camera to the right, using the diagonal line to organize the scene, and cropping the top of the 120 Wall Street Building, Evans enhanced the general effect of abstraction, reducing the skyscraper to a repetition of identical windows on a seemingly continuous plane. At the same time, by radically tilting the horizon he exaggerated the effect of compression of the massive skyscraper on the older buldings beneath, thus drawing a metaphorical histogram of the speculative forces at work in the transformation of the financial district.

Evans's developing awareness of the new issues reaised by modern architecture can be gauged by two photographs probably taken the early months of 1931 as illustrations

97. A sketch on the verso of the photograph (possibily by Paul Grotz) depicting the outline of Manhattan island indicates, incorrectly, a midtown location (WEA 1988.1129.2).

98. "Manhattan – The Proud and Passionate City," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (April 1922), p. 51. The page was illustrated with five photographs, each accompanied by an explanatory caption. In addition to "mechanical monotony," the other themes presented in the article were "movement and mass," "steel structure," "the moving street," and "space and line." According to the anonymous writer (possibly Sheeler and Strand themselves), "The interest of these two artists did not lie in presenting places of value to the sightseer but rather in expressing certain phases of New York through dynamic patterns."

for an article by George Lyman Paine, Jr. on the Red Cross Building (Delano and Aldrich) and the New School for Social Research (Joseph Urban) published in *Hound & Horn* (figs. 284, 348). While the Red Cross Building passed practically unnoticed in the press and in architectural magazines, Joseph Urban's New School for Social Research was extremely well received, cited as the first example of modern architecture in the United States specifically designed to suit the needs of higher education.[99] In his review, Paine compared the design of the two structures stressing their radically different "character," defined both as the relatioship between form and function, and as a building's distinctiveness of design:

> The Red Cross Building asserts nothing. It is negative, entirely content to remain a background against which the ensuing action may take place without antagonism. The New School is positive. It not only anticipates and contributes to the action which will ensue but asserts an effectiveness of character in its own right, entirely apart from that action.[100]

Paine further criticized the design of the Red Cross building for failing to address the issue of its location on a corner and for the misleading use of brickwork, which suggested a bearing wall even if the building was supported by a steel frame. The façade, he claimed, amounted to "a sheet of cardboard shot full of holes giving neither the desired relationship of solid to void nor the impression or an ordered arrangement." In sum, Paine saw the Red Cross building as lacking personality, the result of a number

99. The $500,000 New School included classrooms, offices, studios, workshops, reading rooms, as well as a 650-seat auditorium: see "Modernistic Building for Research School," *New York Times*, October 10, 1929, p. 4. For technical reviews see also Shepard Vogelgesang, "The New School for Social Research, New York City," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 67, n. 4 (April 1930), pp. 305–9 and "The New School for Social Research," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (February 1931), pp. 138–50.

100. Lyman Paine, "Architecture Chronicle: Is Character Necessary?," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (April-June 1931), pp. 411–15 (quotation p. 411).

of design errors made even worse by the the five vertical brick projections dividing the main façade in four bays, a decorative afterthought that added more unnecessary elements to an already confused composition. Negative remarks followed about the the interior spaces, in which the architectural critic detected a similar tendency to create neutral, or characterless volumes, needing color, decoration, furniture and people to acquire a completeness of design.

Evans's photograph, probably made upon request of either Paine or Lincoln Kirtstein, depicted the Red Cross Building from the vantage point of a casual observer walking east on 38th Street. Tilting the camera to show the entire profile of the building, he included the cubic structure on the roof concealing the water tower. Curiously, however, he cropped the bottom section of the skyscraper at the level of the first floor balustrade: with the entire ground floor missing from the photograph, the building seemed to rest on the tall recessed windows crowned by elaborate brick cartouches carrying the symbol of the Red Cross.[101] Despite its apparent neutrality, Evans's illustration offered a deceptive image of the façade, conveying the idea of an arched portico accessible from the street level.

The degree of Evans's resistance to the official celebration of modern architecture can be gauged from the second photograph illustrating Paine's article, depicting Urban's New School for Social Research (fig. 284). Common images made by professional photographers, such as the view by the studio of Nyholm & Lincoln published in *Architectural Record,* offered an almost exact translation of the idealized drawings prepared by architectural renderers, in which the building was generally shown as a decontextualised object (fig. 286).[102] Evans's view, on the contrary, thematized the con-

101. The Red Cross Building was altered in 1939 by an extension built on the north side of the original structure.

102. Vogelgesang, "The New School for Social Research," p. 138. For a presentation drawing preceding construction, see "Social Research School to Have a New Building," *New York Times*, February 16, 1930, p. 147. Interestingly, the same drawing continued to be reproduced after the New School was completed: see Edward Alden Jewell, "Discreet Originality: New School for Social Research Opens

trast between the new structure and the surrounding three-story apartments, similarly to his pictures of the 120 Wall Street Building. Moving away from his nominal subject, he photographed the south front of West 12th Street with the mass of Urban's building towering above the three-story line of brownstones that characterized the neighborhood. Adopting the vantage point of a passer-by looking up at the new building on a causal stroll, Evans included marginal elements normally avoided by professional photographers, such as the back of the truck parked on the street and the tree branch on the opposite corner of the picture. In particular, the horizontal planks of the truck emerging from the shadow in the lower left echoed the design of the New School, with its five strip windows wrapping the outer façade underscored by Evans's control of reflected light. Evans's awareness of this specific architectural theme can be seen in an undated photograph showing the portion of a modernist façade with continuous horizontal spandrels laid in Scottish bond brickwork (fig. 287). Here, on the contrary, the vertical piers are concealed by the window casements; the metal sash windows are recessed from the outer wall, creating a continuous shadow that underscores the horizontal pattern of the façade.

Perhaps instructed by Paul Grotz or directly by Paine, Evans seemed to be aware of the debate on the horizontal versus vertical design of modern façades initiated by Louis Sullivan in the 1890s and rejuvenated in the 1920s by the technological innovations in steel construction.[103] In April 1930, Douglas Haskell wrote an article in *Architectual Record* in which he discussed the relationship between structural constraints and outer ornamentation in the design of modern commercial buildings. In it, Haskell argued that in architectural renderings windows were often downplayed in order to increase the effect of the building's permanence and solidity, as an "effort to convert this cub-

Its Spacious Quarters in Twelfth Street," *New York Times*, January 4, 1931, p. X13 and Rita Susswein, "The New School for Social Research," *Parnassus*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1931), pp. 11–12.

103. Louis Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," *Lippincott's Magazine*, Vol. 57 (March 1896), pp. 403–9.

age into a noble monument."[104] To visualize "the present pre-occupation of most of American city architecture with the study of the 'mass'," the magazine reproduced a plate from Hugh Ferriss's *The Metropolis of To-morrow*.[105] Haskell then went on to discuss the actual treatment of outer surfaces in modern architecture on both sides of the Atlantic, suggesting that while economic factors imposed strict rules on spatial and structural design, the shell of the building was often treated as mere decoration: "Piers and windows – he wrote – are just line and pattern to help out the mass." The architects' indifference toward the old dispute between "verticalism" and "horizontalism" was suggested by two identical photographs depicting a portion of the façade of the Beaux-Arts Apartments – one showing a correct view of the horizontal spandrels, the other turned by 90 degrees – as equally viable solutions to the problem of wall decoration, "essentially a *surface* affair, not affecting the inside" (fig. 288).

Evans continued to address the interrelated issues of architectural mass and outer decoration in a series of photographs of the Daily News Building at 220 East 42nd Street between Second and Third Avenues, designed by John Mead Howells and Raymond Hood. Evans probably photographed the building in 1930, shortly after its completion, looking northwest from 41st Street (fig. 364). Three adjoining 35mm negatives in the Walker Evans Archive suggest that he experimented with direct sunlight in order to record the texture and the recessions of the brick façade, characterized by massive piers separating the vertical window strips. A similar photograph, by Thurman Rotan, was

104. Douglas Haskell, "Building or Sculpture? The Architecture of 'Mass'," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (April 1930), pp. 366–68. A radical use of the horizontal accent was typical of Raymond Hood's Starrett-Lehigh Building and McGraw-Hill Building, both built in 1930–31.

105. In his original comment to this illustration, Ferriss argued that the "sheer planes" of set-back structures imposed by the zoning law subverted the traditional role of sculpture as a decorative element of architecture; conversely, he anticipated that in the future "the building in its entirety will be taken to be a sculptor's work": Ferriss, *The Metropolis of To-morrow*, p. 84. The same rendering was presented in "The New New York: Drawings by Hugh Ferriss," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 1925), pp. 66–67. See also See also "Architectural Tendencies of Today: Drawn by Hugh Ferriss," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 1925), pp. 44–45.

published in November 1930 by *Architectural Forum*, as part of a substantial portfolio on the Daily News Building recently inaugurated (fig. 365).[106] Rotan's view illustrated an essay by Raymond Hood addressing the design problems posed by the building, in which he explained that "the exterior more or less created itself. From the second story to the top, there was no logical reason for varying a window, either in size or location."[107]

The other illustrations presented in *Architectural Forum* are also worth considering, as examples of a sophisticated photographic discourse on modern architecture that went beyond the mere a mere technical illustration. Taken as a whole, the portfolio was organized along two parallel lines, taking the viewer from an architectual drawing to the finished building, and from the general to the particular. The presentation opened with a color drawing by Chesley Bonestell showing a street scene very similar to Evans's view of the New School for Social Research published few months later in *Hound & Horn* (but without Evans's accidental elements). In the background of Bonestell's rendering, the dwarfed silhouette of the Chanin Building designed by Sloan & Robertson – in reality 20 floors taller than the 36-story News Building – evoked the first generation of modern skyscrapers that opened the transformation of the Midwtown area in the mid-1920s.[108]

Following the pastel drawing was a series of photographic plates, beginning with two full-page views by the studio of Nyholm and Lincoln. In the former, Bonestell's fictional rendering was replicated in a high-definition photographic style, showing the striped mass of the skyscraper towering above the baroque accumulation of urban

106. Raymond M. Hood, "The News Building," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 53, No. 5 (November 1930), pp. 530–32.

107. Ibid., p. 531. Although very similar to Evans's photographs, Rotan's view showed the north-east (instead of the south-east) corner of the building.

108. In 1929, Bonestell had collaborated with William van Alen on the design of the façade of the Chrysler Building: see *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (October 1930), frontispiece. Incidentally, Bonestell was the brother-in-law of Sherril V. Schell, a modernist photographer who crossed paths with Evans in 1930, when they both participated in the *International Photography* exhibition organized by Lincoln Kirstein at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art.

structures on 42nd Street, epitomized by the gable roof of the elevated railroad station on Second Avenue. The second photograph showed the tall granite slab of the main entrance decorated with a bas-relief in the *moderne* style with the minuscule passersby on the street, a luminous version of Paul Strand's iconic *Wall Street* of 1915. On the facing page was a photographic composition by Thurman Rotan with a worm's-eye view of the setback arrangement of the skyscraper, accompanied by a montage of the same photograph in high-contrast black and white, repeated 80 times to form a rectangular grid – a modernist version of classical tile mosaics with alternating colored lozenges creating the illusion of three-dimensional cubes (fig. 366).[109] Finally, the last page of the portfolio was devoted to a second geometric montage, in which a similar pattern was obtained by repeating two identical photographs of the Daily News façade by Nyholm and Lincoln and two pictures by George H. Van Anda showing unrolled strips of paper "suggestive of exterior design." Overall, the photographic portfolio stressed issues of geometry, abstraction, and mechanical repetition, suggesting a metaphorical connection between the industrial function of the building (in which the rotary printing presses of the *News* were located) and the formal principles governing the exterior design of the skyscraper.

An anticipation of these formal issues can be found in an earlier structure designed by Raymond Hood with Kenneth M. Murchison that was the subject of an interesting sequence of photographs probably taken by Evans in the winter of 1928. Located in the new residential district of Turtle Bay, on Third Avenue at 44th and 45th Streets, the Allied Arts Building had sparked a new phase of construction promoted by the Beaux-Arts Development Corporation in 1927–28.[110] As we have seen, Evans had pho-

109. The same image had been published in Thurman Rotan, "Composite Photographic Design," *Advertising Arts*, a supplement to *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 15, No. 11 (October 1, 1930), p. 56. See also "A Pattern for a Building," *World's Work*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (January 1931), p. 71 and "Patterns with Pictures," *Advertising Arts,* Design section of *Advertising and Selling* (March 1932), pp. 17–18.

110. Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Designation List 218, LP–1668: Beaux-Arts Apartments*, July 11, 1989, pp. 3–4. See also the Beaux-Arts Apartments advertising leaflet in the collection of Columbia University (YR.0161.MH.001-014).

tographed other buildings in this area designed by Hood and Murchison, such as the Beaux-Arts Apartments at 317 East 44th Street, from elevated vantage points like the Graybar Building (in the winter 1928–29), the Chanin Building, and the Chrysler Building (in 1929).[111] Made possible by setback regulations and steel technology, by the mid-1920s this new building type had begun to attract the attention of European architects visiting the United States. In *Amerika*, Mendelsohn saw it as a pragmatic tool consistent with the spirit of the time, allowing for a good characterization of the urban fabric without the excess of gigantic skyscrapers.[112] In 1927, the advantages and relative pitfalls of setback architecture were also discussed by Richard Neutra in *Wie Baut Amerika,* with four photographs of buildings under construction on Seventh Avenue at 35th Street (fig. 419).[113]

The six photographs taken by Evans in the winter of 1928–1929 show the Allied Arts Building under construction at 304 East 45th Street (figs.421–424, 427). Approaching the western side of the building facing the the Second Avenue El, he pointed the camera toward the top floor of the structure under construction to stress the geometry created by the alternation of solid elements and large openings and the pyramidal progression of recessing blocks in the setback façade. Is is unclear whether Evans took these photographs as a series on a single occasion, or if he returned to photograph the same building on different days. As a whole, the series suggests a dynamic perception of the building's geometrical mass, as in the visual analysis of a rotating solid. In the only surviving print from this series – a 1 ½ × 2 ½-inch contact print in the J. Paul Getty Collection (fig. 427) – the lower part of the original negative has been cropped to stress the almost abstract character of the building; yet the tiny figures of the workers animating the lower

111. Technical details of the Beaux Arts Apartments at 317 East 44th Street, designed by Kenneth Murchison with Raymond Hood, were given in *Architectural Record*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 1929), p. 378 and Vol. 67, No. 3, pp. 252–53.

112. Mendelsohn, *Amerika,* pp. 158–59, 200–1.

113. Richard J. Neutra, *Wie Baut Amerika?* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1927), pp. 14–17.

windows seem to offer a wry comment on the numbing geometry of the modern city, in tune with the critique of the "punctured cubes" that Evans had expressed in his literary fragments and in his photographs of Wall Street.

In September 1930, Evans included one of photographs of the Allied Arts Building in his first published series, entitled "Photographic Studies," presented in *Architectural Record*.[114] As the closing image of the portfolio, he chose the most static and formal photograph of the series, a side view taken from Second Avenue underscoring the ziggurat-like effect of the setback structure (fig. 423). In it, the metal structure of the elevated line cutting across the scene was reduced to a dark horizontal strip occupying the lower one-forth of the scene. Through such reductionist strategy, Evans achieved a visual effect similar to that of urban etchings and prints of the period, such as Charles Sheeler's *Delmonico Building* (1926) or Martin Lewis's *Building a Babylon* (1929) (figs. 425, 426).[115]

The issue of the skyscraper façade as a geometrical arrangement of the openings on the building's outer skin debated by Raymond Hood was the subject of at least three photographs portraying the Commodore and the Graybar Buildings in 1929 or in the early months of 1930. As we have seen, in around 1931 Evans photographed the sculptural mass of the Graybar Building looking down from the Chrysler Building across the street. Sometime in 1929 or 1930, he walked on the elevated street flanking the east side of the Grand Central Station (now known as the Park Avenue viaduct) to photograph the rear of the Graybar, a brick surface perforated *ad infinitum* by a regular pattern of windows from a worm's-eye perspective. In one of these photographs, Evans adopted an exaggerated worm's-eye perspective, looking up frontally at the continuous wall hit by a raking light that underscored the vertical piers and the slight recession of the upper façade. Compared to *Wall Street Windows* – the frontal view of the

114. Evans, "Photographic Studies,", pp. 193–98.
115. Martin Lewis, "Building a Babylon," *Pencil Points*, Vol. 11, No. 10 (Oct. 1930), p. 732.

National City Company Building seen from the Doherty Building (fig. 98) – Evans's Graybar appeared as a straightforward indictment of architectural design commanded by mere speculative principles.[116] In addition to this view, on the same day Evans took at least two more photographs. In one, the Graybar Building was shown again from a worm's-eye perspective, this time as a cubical mass modulated by the gridlock of identical windows and by the rectangular shadow cast on its southern wall by the adjoining Commodore Hotel (fig. 389). Even if taken from a different vantage point, this view echoes a photograph published in Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, presenting the building as "an independent block" (fig. 388).[117] In a sister view, which Evans selected for publication in his *Architectural Record* portfolio of 1930, the Graybar and the Commodore buildings were shown side to side, forming an almost continuous wall, interrupted by the narrow alley at the center of the picture and distinguished by the different types of materials used for the façades – luminous buff brick for the Graybar and darker, red brick for the Commodore (fig. 390). As in other occasions, Evans included minor details of the urban context, such as the decorative molding of Grand Central Station in the foreground, hinted at by the three inconspicuous marks at the top of another Graybar view (fig. 386) and clearly inserted as a counterpoint in the left-hand part of the Commodore/Graybar scene selected for the *Architectural Record* portfolio (fig. 390).

Evans explored worm's-eye perspective and repetitive architectural schemes on other occasions as well. A early example of this interest is offered by two photographs of the International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) Building at 67 Broad Street, between Beaver and South William Streets, designed by Buchman & Kahn with Louis S. Weeks (figs. 114, 118).[118] Taken at the end of 1928, shortly after the building's opening, three

116. A similar view was shared by architectural critic S. J. Vickers, who spoke of "three acres of glass windows": see "The Graybar Building, New York City," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (September 1927), pp. 176-89 (quotation p. 178). See also Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 107, for a similar photograph of the Woolworth Building taken by Karweik.

117. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 198–99 (photograph by Karweik).

118. "Big Telephone Edifice Opening This Week," *New York Times*, April 29, 1928, p. RE16.

years before the construction of the building's expansion in 1931, these photographs show the vertical shaft of the 33-story skyscraper seen from the rear, framed on the sides by smaller structures on South William Street. As in other occasions, Evans underscored the endless repetition of windows on the façades of tall buildings, creating a highly formalized photograph that questioned the boundary between aesthetic pleasure and visual alienation in the modern city. Here, however, he relied on the evenness of light to contrive a sense of spatial ambiguity, generated by collapsing the distance between the bare walls of the ITT Building to the left and the three-bay façade of the 12-story building to the right. In a second photograph, probably taken on a different day, this subtle articulation of planes is reinforced by the use of direct sunlight and cast shadows, as well as by the obliteration of spatial references in the lower foreground. In the city of walls, the silhouettes of the anonymous workers in the lower foreground are reminiscent of graphic works of the late 1920s in which the human figure is shown as a counterpoint to the geometry of architecture, such as for example *Walkers in the City* by Elsie Driggs (1928) (fig. 119). Evans's ITT image also replays similar formal strategies employed in Precisionist paintings such as Charles Demuth's *Rue du singe qui pêche* of 1921 (fig. 115). While Demuth used overlays of translucent paint typical of Futurist and Cubist painting to evoke a multiplication of planes and sensations in the modern environment, Evans experimented with cast shadows of different intensity to suggest spatial depth and to elicit the layered experience of the surrounding city.[119]

In the changing urbanscape of Manhattan, Evans had several opportunities to explore these themes. Considered as a whole, many of the supposed "abstractions" that he took from the streets of Manhattan, like the views taken from the top of tall buildings, indicate a wide range of concerns that encompassed formal, architectural, and critical aspects of the modern city. In 1928–1929, for example, he scouted the building sites of

119. On Demuth's use of this pictorial technique, see Barbara Haskell, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1987), pp. 124–25.

the Consolidated Gas Company Building on East 14th Street and of the Savoy-Plaza on 59th Street, studying the interplay between the rear walls of the adjoining buildings and the arms of the cranes drawing diagonal lines at the bottom of the scene (figs. 293–295). This theme was also the subject of a 1929 photograph by Berenice Abbott (fig. 296) and of at least two views taken by Stieglitz from the window of An American Place in 1931 (fig. 297).[120] In 1930, construction sites featured prominently among the photographs provided by Margaret Bourke-White and other photographic studios to illustrate *Fortune*'s first article on the skyscraper.[121] Typically, Henry Luce's magazine editors privileged issues related to modern engineering and innovations in the building process, using photographs to construct a rhetoric of American efficiency and rationality.[122] Significantly, the closing illustration of the article was a diagram recording all the phases of construction of 40 Wall Street (H. Craig Severance, 1930), from the initial wrecking of older buildings in May 1929 to the last touches put on its "furniture & fittings" less than a year later. Just as professional photographs were often made to resemble "real life" copies of idealized architectural drawings depicting the skyscraper as a design object, so pictures of construction sites were presented as fragments of a larger narrative celebrating progress and the perfection of the urban machine.

Always altert to the pitfalls of iconic or rhetorical images, Evans continued to explore this theme over several months, taking series of photographs with a characteristically skeptical eye. Again, it is not unlikely that he derived some inspiration from Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, especially from his comments about the "unconscious" structures of the city revealed by the rear of modern buildings, unaffected by the aesthetic and economic rationales of design.[123] Evans's attraction to the blank walls of the

120. See Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set,* Vol. 2, cat. 1374–1375 and Abbott's *Building New York*, 1929, reproduced in O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott*, p. 10.

121. "Skyscrapers," *Fortune*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 1930), pp. 32–37.

122. Sharon Corwin, "Picturing Efficiency: Precisionism, Scientific Management, and the Effacement of Labor," *Representations*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (November 2003), pp. 139–65.

123. See Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 171, 203.

adjoining structures, rather than to the "heroic" body of the new skyscrapers, also signals a particular awareness of the impermanence of the city's surfaces. To photograph construction sites was for Evans a way to highlight the ambiguous balance between construction and destruction, but also a cunning strategy to document the temporary city revealed by demolitions and soon to be buried under new, thick layers of concrete.

Judging from the surviving negatives, Evans often explored these situations with an eye for dynamic perception, taking photographs from slightly different vantage points and varying the camera's angle as in a filmic shot. This strategy – somehow reminiscent of experimental films of the time, such as Robert Florey's *Skyscraper Symphony* of 1929 – is particularly evident in two larger sets of negatives in the Walker Evans Archive, for which no corresponding prints survive.[124] A first group, comprising six variants taken with a 2 ½ × 4 ¼-inch camera, can be identified as depicting the Essex House at 160 Central Park South (then known as Sevilla Towers), in its last phase of construction in 1930 (figs. 496–501). While it is difficult to reconstruct the exact order of the original sequence, the series suggests that Evans' initial interest was sparked by the mass and by the texture of the side of the building seen from the vantage point of a casual observer walking along Central Park South (fig. 496). The other five photographs of the series are revealing in that they show various degrees of formal experimentation with the materials at hand. Evans progressively approached his subject while at the same time tilting, rotating, raising, and lowering his hand-held camera.

In a second, important series of twelve 35mm negatives, Evans confronted one of the most notable subjects in the iconography of modern New York, the 29-story Park Row Building (figs. 148–153, 160). Again, Evans chose an unorthodox vantage point, standing on Ann Street and pointing the camera upwards toward the windows of the south façade. More than half of the photographs he took on that occasion dealt with

124. On the "panning down" technique in films on modern skyscrapers, see Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 95.

the casual geometry of the space between adjoining buildings. Standing in the middle of the narrow alley and pointing the camera straight up, he recorded the jagged portion of cloudless sky framed by the irregular shape of the skyscrapers' cornices.

Built in 1899, the Park Row Building had been extensively photographed in the three decades before Evans. As Erica Hirshler has observed, many artists favored the "columnar presence" of its south façade, and it was especially through the iconic photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn (1909) (fig. 154) and Charles Sheeler (1920) (fig. 155) that the Park Row Building became a staple image of modern architecture, "with its irregular grouping of narrow wings joined by steel struts, [which] revealed the heart of the skyscraper, its character reduced to clearly defined prismatic shapes."[125] In particular, one of Sheeler's views from the Equitable Building was published in *Vanity Fair* in 1921, accompanied by a brief note entitled "Cubist Architecture in New York."[126] From this photograph Sheeler drew a pencil sketch, followed in 1922 by *Offices*, a large canvas later known as *Skyscrapers*, which was acquired by the Phillips Collection in 1926. Evans was the first to explore the rear of this skyscraper from a worm's-eye perspective and to stress its relationship with the adjoining structures. It is of note that one of the photographs he took in 1930 or 1931 was replicated unknowningly by Charles Sheeler in 1950, who revisited the subject as part of a late series of architectural photographs that he used, in part, as sources for his new paintings (fig. 161).

In the 1920s, the issue of unregulated construction resulting in claustrophobic urban canyons and in the progressive alienation from the natural world had been detected by other photographers as well. Several photographs included in Lubschez's *Manhattan: The Magical Island*, including one explicitly entitled *The Patch of Blue,* thematized the reduction of urban experience to a geometry of tall commercial buildings scissoring

125. Erica E. Hirshler, "The 'New New York' and the Park Row Building: American Artists View an Icon of the Modern Age," *The American Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1989), pp. 26–45.

126. "Cubist Architecture in New York," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (January 1921), p. 72.

out the sky in a series of irregular grey cuttings, as in a collage[127]. A more immediate precedent of Evans's Park Row photographs, however, can be found in the work of his friend Ralph Steiner, who in 1928 had published a small series in *Vanity Fair* under the heading "Cubistic Phases of New York" (fig. 158).[128] Here, and in other photographs he took in the mid-1930s using a fish-eye lens, Steiner crafted a new image of the modern city based on subjective perception, conveyed by distorted views of tall buldings seen from below. In the preceding years, a similar style had been developed in motion pictures as well as in European photography, and it is interesting that the editors of *Vanity Fair* mentioned the German film *Variety* as a precedent of Steiner's experiments.[129] What set apart Steiner's photographs of this kind from most European photography of the New Vision, however, was his insistence on dramatic light and deep shadows, which allowed him to represent the city as a play of unstable masses *and* as a combination of segmented surfaces. The precariousness of urban experience previously seen in Alvin Langdon Coburn's photographs or in John Marin's watercolors was now counterbalanced by severe compositions of geometrical shadows, and it is telling that the editors of *Vanity Fair* used Steiner's views not only to extol the "fright" or the "ecstasy" of the new metropolis, but also to present New York as a "Cubistic" city. "Even to those who

127. Lubschez, *Manhattan: The Magical Island*, pl. 17.

128. "Cubistic Phases of New York. The Camera Reveals, for the First Time, Some New Angles of the City's Architecture," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April 1928), p. 58.

129. E. A. Dupont's 1925 film *Variety*, photographed by Karl Freund, is considered to be among the first to rely on "unbound" camera movements to convey the sense of psychological perception in dynamic situations. Paul Outerbridge, who studied filmmaking with the German director Georg Pabst and worked as an advisor on two films directed by Dupont in 1929, claimed that *Variety*'s "unusual camera angles, which were praised by critics, were similar to ones he had used a few years before in his photographs": Paul Martineau, *Paul Outerbridge: Command Performance* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009), pp. 7 and 23, note 47. Both Steiner and Outerbridge had studied at the Clarence White School of Photography in New York. For a joint appraisal of their 1920s work, see Beaumont Newhall, "Photo Eye of the 1920s: The Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition of 1929," *New Mexico Studies in the Fine Arts,* No. 2 (1977), pp. 5–12.

profess a complete ignorance of ultra-modern tendencies in art – they wrote – it must be obvious that cubism – originally the somewhat mythical province of a few extremist foreign painters – has become an architectural reality in that peculiarly American city, New York." It should be noted that Steiner's "shots" were not discussed *per se* as "Cubist" photographs, but as visualizations of a purely American (and implicitly anti-European) version of Cubism, the product of the zoning law with "combinations of volumes, relations of masses, which shame the cubists."[130]

While Evans may have been aware of Steiner's formal experiments, especially after they became acquainted at the end of the decade, his photographs of tall buildings rarely exploited the dramatizing effects of deep shadows and chiaroscuro seen in the *Vanity Fair* portfolio. One interesting exception is a series of photographs taken on the construction site of the Lincoln Building on East 42nd Street in the winter 1928–1929, dominated by the silhouetted structures lined up on the south side of the plot (figs. 391–392, 396).[131] As in other instances, Evans dwelled on the back of the surviving structures that were bound to be dwarfed by the 53-story Lincoln Building, recording a scene of sharp contrasts and apparent chaos. Evans's insistence on the picturesque effect of backlighting is particularly evident in the crenellated tower of the 299 Madison Avenue Building (presently known as the Library Hotel), a neo-Gothic brick slab designed by Hill & Stout that served as the first venue of the Fred F. French Company when it was inaugurated in 1913.[132] Just above and behind it, the top of the 10 East 40th Street Building seemed to mark a dramatic break in the evolution of the city; in several photographs, Evans established a direct relationship between the slim towers of

130. "Cubistic Phases of New York," p. 58.

131. "Another Skyscraper for the Grand Central Zone," *New York Times*, November 4, 1928, Section 12, p. 1.

132. "Madison Avenue Loft," *New York Times*, November 17, 1912, p. XX1; "In the Grand Central Zone," *The Sun*, April 27, 1913, p. 2; Christopher Gray, "Two Buildings With Unusual Touches, and Histories," *New York Times,* December 6, 1998, p. RE5.

the office buildings in the background and the metal structure of the vertical cranes on the construction site.

In 1929, one photograph of the series was the subject of Evans's very first publication in *Alhambra,* a short-lived magazine directed by Ángel Flores devoted to Hispanic literature and culture (fig. 396).[133] Titled *New York in the Making*, it showed a worker dangerously perched on top of an angle crane in the middle of the construction site. The playful photographs taken by László Moholy-Nagy in Dessau between 1926 and 1928, showing a human figure in the act of jumping off from one of the balconies of the Bauhaus building, can be seen as precedents to Evans's depiction of the new relationship between the body and modern architecture (fig. 395).[134] *New York in the Making*, however, can also be seen Evans's only homage to the "men at work" genre that two years later was canonized by Lewis Hine's book on the construction of the Empire State Building.[135] Yet, while Hine's photographs celebrated the skyscraper riveters and engineers by showing the peril and the precision of their heroic work, Evans's interpretation of New York's race for height was ironic, in that he depicted the worker as a stunt or as mock version of Harold Lloyd's character in the celebrated movie, *Safety Last* (1923). Evans constantly refused to portray workers and city dwellers according to the common stereotypes of the active, efficient, rational metropolis. Danger, decay, confusion, or simply inactivity were often the subjects of his counter-anecdotal snapshots; and if he adopted some of the themes and styles of European photography, he played with

133. *Alhambra*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August 1929), p. 47. In the same issue, Evans published a partial translation of Blaise Cendrars's "Mad" (pp. 34–35, 46).

134. See Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Fotografie Film* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1927), p. 58 (*Balkons*) and *Von Material zu Architektur* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1929), trans. Daphne M. Hoffmann, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1932), pl. 169 (*Construction of the framework for a Zeiss planetarium*).

135. Lewis W. Hine, *Men at Work. Photographic Studies of Modern Men and Machines* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932).

revealing details to counter the dominant faith in photography's power to clarify and organize the visual field.[136]

Evans's tongue-in-cheek critique of the modern city did not go unnoticed by the most acute observers of the time, and it should not come as a surprise that in 1931 a second photograph from the Lincoln Building series was published in *Creative Art* to illustrate Frank Lloyd Wright's lecture "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper" (fig. 392).[137] Here, as in *Alhambra*, the magazine editors were probably responsible for the captions accompanying the photographs, but it is likely that Evans was not against their decision to use the first sentence of a memorable Wright paragraph to describe his own view of New York:

> What beauty the whole has is haphazard, notwithstanding the book-architecture which space-makers-for-rent have ingeniously tied onto the splendid steel sinews that strain from story to story beneath all this weight of make-believe.[138]

In the following paragraphs we will see how Evans, in a great number of photographs depicting billboards, commercial signs and theater marquees, confronted precisely that "weight of make-believe" that New York skyscrapers laid upon "the steel,

136. While it is possible that Evans's *New York in the Making* was thus captioned by the editors of *Alhambra*, it is worth noting that the same title was used by Frank A. Nankivell for an etching he exhibited at the Armory Show in 1913, a much more optimistic view depicting the Singer and Woolworth Buildings, with the Adams Express Building under construction in the foreground: see Association of American Painters and Sculptors, Inc., *Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Modern Art*, New York, 1913, p. 59, #861.

137. Henry McBride, "The Palette Knife," followed by Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper," *Creative Art*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (May 1931), pp. 321–32. A second Evans photograph illustrating the article, as we have seen, was a view of the Graybar Building taken from the Chrysler Building across the street.

138. Wright, "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper," p. 330.

behind it all, [that] still nobly stands up to its more serious responsibilities," as Wright went on to say. During this period Evans often addressed the relationship between surface and structure in modern architecture, possibly in accordance with the general critique of the American city presented by Erich Mendelsohn in his 1926 book *Amerika*. Although Evans, in all probability, was only marginally aware of the extent of this architectural debate when he began photographing from the Brooklyn Bridge in the fall of 1928, it is significant that rather soon he tried to seek recognition in architectural circles. In September 1930, five of his "photographic studies" were published in *Architectural Record*; a second series, indirectly addressing urban issues, was published in the December number of *Creative Art*.[139] Evans's poetic fragments (which we have discussed in relation to his *Walls Street Windows* of 1929) seem to confirm that during his first years of serious work he developed an ambivalent, if not wholly antithetic, approach to the most alienating aspects of the "Chrysler period." The same type of ambivalence can be seen in the other illustrations selected by the *Creative Art* editors to accompany Wright's indictment of the skyscraper: two uncaptioned lithographs by Adriaan Lubbers and, significantly, a photograph by Ralph Steiner reprised from the "Cubistic" *Vanity Fair* series of 1928, here recaptioned "All skyscrapers have been whittled to a point."[140] As with Evans's photographs, the caption was excerpted from Wright's article, which continued: "Verticality is already stale; vertigo has given way to nausea." Reproduced in different contexts, then, the same photographs could be made to claim almost anything about the city they recorded, especially if presented as individual, apparently self-explaining icons. It is probably for this reason that Evans would soon learn to present his work in series and sequences.

139. Walker Evans, "Photographic Studies," pp. 193–98 and "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1930), pp. 453–56.

140. Ibid., pp. 326–27, 332. Lubbers's lithographs can be identified as *Exchange Alley* and *Broad Street*, both of 1929.

The degree of manipulation to which urban imagery could be subjected in the parallel discourses of art and architecture is testified by a circular woodblock color-print by Émile Antoine Verpilleux's, entitled *The Growing City*, depicting the very same subject of Evans's view, published in *Creative Art* few months before the Frank Lloyd Wright article (fig. 394).[141] In terms of composition and vantage point, Evans's photograph and Verpilleux's print bear such strong similarities as to suggest a direct relationship, although no information is available regarding a possible exchange between the photographer and the artist. In *Creative Art,* art critic Malcolm Salaman presented Verpilleux as a lover of "the modern architectural wonders of the city" and singled out *The Growing City* for the "charming" quality of its "a high massive buildings, seen in the recession of their several planes. The red glow of the sun is upon them and a transient feature is its reflection in the many windows, with a calm blue sky above. In the lower ranges of the buildings are scaffoldings, suggesting that human effort is ceaseless, and the city still must grow."[142] Color, symbol, and handicraft were conjured up to impose on the haphazard metropolis the multiple orders of space (the "recession" of planes), time (the "transient feature" of reflected light), and history (because "the city still must grow").

Based on a similar act of observation, the print and the photograph were used by the same magazine to serve opposite purposes in the ongoing debate on the transformation of New York. Evans's view of the Lincoln Building site, in sharp contrast to Verpilleux's celebration of architecture and growth, was presented as a critique of unbridled competition and of the shortcomings of city planning. Clearly, such divergent interpretations reflected the discursive spaces in which these two images were presented by the editors

141. Malcolm C. Salaman, "A Chat to the Printer Lover," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (November 1930), p. 349. The print had already been reproduced (in one color) in the *New York Times* for November 17, 1929, p. X13, in conjunction with an exhibition of Verpilleux's prints at the Kennedy Galleries.

142. Malcolm C. Salaman, "A Chat to the Printer Lover," p. 345. In the same issue, a modernist view of New York more attuned to Evans's work was represented by an interesting portfolio of photographs by Ira Martin: "From a Series of Thirty Views of New York by Ira Wright Martin," pp. 358–64.

of *Creative Art*: while Salaman's "chat to the print lover" extolled art objects for their refinement and their decorative potential, Wright's article on the "tyanny" of the skyscraper offered a staunch critique of contemporary culture and of its economic values. But marking the difference between these parallel representations was also a specific element of their visual language, namely, the way in which they framed the urbanscape. In *The Growing City,* the elaborate frame drawn around the circular print telescoped a distant view as if through an architectural oculus, thus imposing onto the soaring city a narrative order that evoke similar strategies seen in works such as the mid-15th century *Adoration of the Magi* painted by Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi. On the contrary, Evans drastically cropped the original negative in order to strip the scene down to the bare essentials and to establish a dialectical tension between the borders of the photograph and the geometry of the modern city; by suppressing the margins of the visual field, the sky, the building tops above, he redirected the viewer's attention to the somber, tragic, cross-shaped shadow of the building at the center of the scene, in a reversed anticipation of the corrugated tin façade he was to record in Moundville, Alabama, in the summer of 1936.

Thus the importance of framing in Evans's early photographs cannot be underestimated, despite the apparent casualness of many of his urban views. Several negatives in the Walker Evans Archive suggest that he often adopted new visual strategies addressing precisely the issue of peripheral vision in everyday life. Whereas modernist photographers tended to exploit the possibilities of selective framing to create highly textural or sculptural images of the tall building, Evans often adjusted his vantage point to *include* marginal elements of urban landscape normally considered as disturbances. His treatment of the General Motors Building, just south of Columbus Circle, is significant in this respect (figs. 486, 488). Two of the three surviving negatives on this subject, probably among the first Evans made in late 1928 or 1929, seem to duplicate the abstracting qualities that were so common in the visual treatment of the skyscraper in architectural and art publications of the time, such as Erich Mendelsohn's discussion of the Fred F.

French Building in the last section of *Amerika*.[143] A third snapshot of the series, however, confronted the city's "haphazard" beauty by carefully composing a scene in which the building mass is surrounded by accidental elements of the urban landscape (fig. 488): the top of a lamppost perfectly aligned with the corner of the skyscraper, the hat of a passerby floating at the lower left of the picture, and a flagpole jutting in horizontally to delimit the upper border of the frame. Together with the cast shadow projected on the side of the General Motors Building and the commercial sign on the top of it, these disjointed elements were probably meant to distract the viewer from the soaring shape and the repetitive pattern of the skyscraper and, more generally, to evoke the dynamic disorder of the city. In the context of the modern city, these fragments are potentially disturbing in that they are dysfunctional compared to the essential logic of the structure at the center of the stage. Their voluptuous curves, like "inadvertent little gestures" inscribed in the unconscious order of the city, stand in clear contrast to the rational norms of the zoning law and of setback architecture generally discussed in magazines of the time (fig. 489).[144]

Finally, the composition appears to undermine common perceptions of the built environment, raising doubts about the actual distance, height, and size of its nominal subject. As we have seen, even when common representations of the modern skyscraper caricaturized the height of new buildings at the expense of the surrounding urban fabric, they still retained a fundamental connection with the perspectival order of ordinary experience. For instance, in October 1928 *Vanity Fair* published three photographs by Ralph Steiner under the general title "The Island of the Giants," including

143. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 221 (photograph by Erich Karweik).

144. See, for example, "The Interesting Arrangement of the Setbacks Is Due to the Irregularity of the Site – General Motors Building, New York," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (February 1928), p. 165. I owe the notion of "inadvertent little gestures" to Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 40, quoted in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 89.

a "taxi's eyeview of a new building on Broadway" (the New York Telephone Building on West Street) and a photograph of 57 Broadway showing "the pedestrian's sense of his own picayuneness as he scurries about the feet of New York's skyscraper monsters" (fig. 491).[145] At around the same time, Berenice Abbott's view of the National City Company Building – a dramatic worm's-eye view looking up from Wall Street – included the flagpole of an adjoining building as a formal element that served the purpose of reaffirming, rather than disrupting, the basic rule of one-point perspective associated with subjective observation (fig. 159).

Evans's depiction of the General Motors Building, on the contrary, relied on the logic of montage to decontextualize the signs of everyday experience and to piece them together in an unexpected configuration, in ways that recall Paul Strand's *Fifth Avenue, New York*, 1915 (fig. 487). In contrast to the sculptural mass of the skyscraper, here the flagpole and the hat seem to be floating in space as pure forms or symbols, disconnected from the historical time of the city. While Evans's visual ideas stemmed from a direct confrontation with the city, they were not altogether new. The reformulation of the traditional figure-ground relationship was a relatively common issue in post-Cubist painting, including for example Fernand Léger's series on the "objects in space, minus perspective," in which isolated elements were strewn across the space of the canvas on a neutral background (fig. 235). But it was mostly in literary circles close to Surrealism that a similar type of approach was developed in the interwar period, starting with Philippe Soupault's rediscovery of the *Songs of Maldoror* by Isidore Ducasse in 1917 and André Breton's publication of the *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924.[146] It was precisely Ducasse's famous idea of beauty as "the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a

145. "The Island of Giants. Some Cubistic Views of New York's Skyscrapers: Or, the Last and Most Improbable of Sinbad's Tours," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (October 1928), p. 65.

146. Privately published in 1868–1869 under the pseudonym of Comte de Lautréamont, Isidore Ducasse's *Les chants de Maldoror* deeply affected Breton's notion of "chance encounter": see for example Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 189 ff.

sewing machine and an umbrella," later appropriated by Surrealist artists, that was at stake in a number of photographs Evans took during his early years, when he was associated with the gallery of Julien Levy, New York's main venue for surrealist art.[147] From this perspective, specific visual tropes that recur in some of these early images – such as the hat and other anthropomorphic elements potentially charged with sexual meaning – can be seen as nods to the symbolic codes of Freud's psychology and to its subsequent photographic treatments, such as Man Ray's *Untitled (Man's Hat)* of 1933 (fig. 575).[148]

Typical surrealist elements resurface with some regularity in Evans's choice of subject matter, such as shop windows, mannequins, mirrors, a chest of drawers or a rocking horse abandoned on the curb (figs. 233–234, 311–312, 538, 615).[149] While Evans occasionally explored the possibilities afforded by surrealist montage, he never abandoned the proper linear style of the machine age. The contradiction inherent to this program was part of a dialectic of the time. As Anthony Vidler has observed, a parallel can be drawn between the "dependency of surrealist fantasy on the real objects of the machine world" and the preference for individualized objects of Purist painters such as Le Corbusier and Amedée Ozenfant: "Surrealism and purism, indeed, fetishized precisely the same types of objects: what for surrealists were 'objets trouvés' or vehicles of oneiric

147. In the 1920s, Ducasse's book was available in English through the translation of John Rodker, *The Lay of Maldoror* (London: The Casanova Society, 1924); an early translation of the sixth canto, including the famous quotation, was published in *Broom*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (December 1922), pp. 35–51 (quotation p. 36).

148. Man Ray's photographs of hatted women or mannequins were published as illustrations to Tristan Tzara, "D'un certain automatisme du gout," *Minotaure*, Nos. 3–4 (December 1933), pp. 81–84. For a discussion of the hat in surrealist photography, see Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," in Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Washington D.C., The Corcoran Gallery of Art and New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), pp. 15–42.

149. One photograph by Evans – *Outdoor Advertising, Florida*, 1934 (WEA 1994.258.346) – was included by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 212.

desire and for Le Corbusier were 'objets-membres-humains,' or the physical extensions of the body."[150]

Similar strategies are in place in other photographs of the early period. In 1930, Evans photographed Ely Jacques Kahn's Commerce Building still under construction on Third Avenue at 44th Street, just north of the Chrysler Building, as part of a larger composition including the tracks of the elevated railway to the right, a "bishop's crook" type of lamppost to the left, and a five-story brick building in the foreground (fig. 400). On the façade of the older building, a large billboard carrying a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty framed by a stylized neoclassical cornice advertised the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank, known for its Beaux-Arts building located in Downtown Manhattan at 51 Chambers Street. Ralph Steiner relied on similar strategies for a series of photographs illustrating Paul Frankl's 1928 survey of modern design and architecture, *New Dimensions*. One notable example is a worm's-eye view of the neo-Gothic Bush Tower on West 42nd Street (Helmle & Corbett, 1916–1918), which Steiner, with his distinguishing sense of irony, juxtaposed to a gigantic billboard carrying the word "KING" (fig. 401).[151]

Another telling example of Evans's ability to play with the identity of New York's buildings is a photograph taken at the intersection of Wall, Beaver, and Pearl streets, showing the 15-story, renaissance-style Beaver Building. As with the Commerce

150. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 156. To reinforce this point, Vidler mentions Le Corbusier's reference to De Chirico's dream of "those gigantic cranes which raise high over the teeming building sites sections of floating fortresses with heavy towers like the breasts of ante-diluvian mammals": *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Cres, 1925), trans. James I. Dunnett, *The Decorative Art of Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 187, with reference to "Rêves – Giorgio De Chirico," *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 1 (December 1924), p. 3. Evans's *New York in the Making*, with its construction worker stemming from the top of a crane against the backdrop of a row of skyscrapers, seems to elicit similar surrealist associations.

151. Paul T. Frankl, *New Dimensions: The Decorative Arts of Today in Words and Pictures* (New York: Payson & Clark, 1928), pl. 5.

Building, the railroad tracks of the Second Avenue line, the glass globe of a street light, and a portion of an adjoining building are framed from an unexpected vantage point in order to create a jarring composition of unrelated fragments. The Beaver Building, designed by Clinton and Russell in 1903–4, closely resembled its immediate predecessor, Daniel Burnham's Flatiron Building of 1902, famously portrayed by Alfred Stieglitz and subsequently by the likes of Edward Steichen and Alvin Langdon Coburn.[152] It is tempting to believe that Evans, who at the time had mixed feelings about Stieglitz's father-figure, intentionally parodied one of the most celebrated icons of "modern" photography by recasting it in the "modernist" language of the 1920s.[153]

A further example of Evans's interest in the surrealist technique of montage is provided by three photographs in which framing and vantage point work together to create an unexpected relationship between buildings and urban statues. Depicting urban monuments and classical statues against the backdrop of the modern city was not unheard of in 1920s New York: photographs like Ira Martin's *At the Plaza* (c. 1927) and Edward Alenius's *Manhattan* (c. 1930) fall squarely within this scheme (figs. 356, 357). In both cases, photographic composition was effectively geared towards a coherent image of the well-designed city. In *At the Plaza*, the female figure Pomona decorating the Pulitzer Memorial Fountain of Abundance was used to foreground the restrained elegance of the Savoy-Plaza and of the Sherry Netherland Hotels across the street. With a hint of modernity conveyed by the apparent casualness of the snapshot, the photograph subtly

152. A copy of this photograph in the collection of the Minneapolis Museum of Art is captioned uncorrectly "Flat Iron Building, New York": Christian A. Peterson, *Walker Evans: The Collection of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2003), pl. 2.

153. On Alfred Stieglitz and the city: Joel Smith, "How Stieglitz Came to Photograph Cityscapes," *History of Photography*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter 1996), pp. 320–31; Id., *New York Modernism and the Cityscapes of Alfred Stieglitz, 1927–1937*, PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2000; Joanne Lukitsh, "Alone on the Sidewalks of New York. Alfred Stieglitz's Photography, 1892–1913," in *Seeing High & Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, edited by Patricia A. Johnston (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 210–27.

expressed the inherent values of the original City Beautiful scheme of Grand Army Plaza originally devised by sculptor Karl Bitter together with Thomas Hastings.[154] In Alenius's *Manhattan*, a similar composition included the tall statues decorating the Chambers Street entrance of the Hall of Records and the arched portal on the north façade of the Municipal Building across the street.

Evans's treatment of this visual trope was imbued with an original sense of irony and contradiction. Perhaps the closest comparison with *Manhattan* and *At the Plaza* is provided by a small negative he made in the winter of 1928–1929, in which the soaring shaft of the 10 East 40th Street Building is placed against the allegorical figure of Discovery decorating the base of the 1912 flagpole on the south-east corner of the New York Public Library terrace (fig. 354).[155] While the main elements composing the picture were the same as in the previous examples, thematic and stylistic differences set it apart from its predecessors. Thematically, the picture contrasted the modernist geometry of the skyscraper under construction with the curves of a recognizably classical statue, possibly with an added interest in the different use of metal in the two artifacts. Equally important, by kneeling low on the ground and close to the base of the flagpole, Evans deformed the shape of the sculpture and exaggerated its disproportion to the building. The final result was a caricaturized version of New York's history and a reinterpretation of the original allegory of discovery: loooking away from the skyscraper (and from the banner included to the right), the sculpted figure seems to be frozen in an expression of denial or disgust.

Continuing with this theme are two photographs of the Maine Memorial on the southwest corner of Central Park, also taken during this period (figs. 506, 510). Again,

154. For the history of the monument, see Michele H. Bogart, "*Maine Memorial* and *Pulitzer Fountain*," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 41–61 and *Public Sculpture and the Civic Ideal in New York, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 205 ff.

155. The flagpole was designed by Thomas Hastings, while the winged figures were sculpted by Raffaele and Francesco Menconi: Mark A. Hewitt *et al., Carrère & Hastings Architects* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2006), Vol. 1, p. 305.

Evans chose a very low vantage point to establish a visual connection between the monument and the tall buldings surrounding Columbus Circle. The effect of deformation is particularly pronounced in a picture coupling a sculpture of the Maine Monument with the gigantic neon sign of the United States Rubber Company on the roof of the company's building at 1784 Broadway (fig. 510). As we will see in the following chapters, Evans recurrently played with billboards and signs to demystify the obtrusive language of the commercial city. Contemporary depictions, such as Arnold Rönnebeck's *Columbus Circle* and Edward Suydam's *Columbus Circle Looking South* (figs. 511, 512), indicate that artists were particularly aware of the consequences of massive advertising on the urbanscape of Central Park South, a traditional subject of dispute in park's history.[156] Though Evans's photographs registered similar concerns, they were not meant as generic indictments of the unplanned city, or as rehearsals of its ambiguous beauty. By focusing on specific urban facts and their unexpected correlations, they implied an active role on the part of the viewer, rather than mere contemplation; and even when the resulting images verged on the visual pun, they remained relatively open to interpretation. Thus the allegorical statue of Victory (once decorated by metal wreaths) is seen from behind, stretching out from the prow of the ship, its fists clenched, as if trying to topple the neo-Gothic tower of the Manufacturers Trust Company Building across the square, while a large billboard to the left recites its mantra, undisturbed: "NOW – NEW – TAYSTEE BREAD" (fig. 506). Similarly, in a sister photograph, the foot of the statue protruding at the center of the scene seems to play ironically with the neon sign in the background, possibly referencing the fact that in the 1920s the U.S. Rubber Company was an established manufacturer of rubber footware, in addition to tires and inner tubes (fig. 513). An alternative, more sardonic, reading would entail seeing the dark, massive foot of the allegory of Peace as menacing to crush the U.S. sign – an

156. Roy Rosenzweig, Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 196–99.

iconography of subversion much closer to the visual discourse of politically-oriented magazines such as *New Masses* (fig. 514).

Occasionally, Evans relied on the strategies of surrealist montage to unveil the continuities, instead of the ruptures, among disparate elements of the urban environment. Pushcarts, pullcarts, and horse wagons, for instance, were among his recurring subjects, signalling the persistence of older economic and social structures within the urbanscape of the modern skyscraper. Perhaps the most explicit photograph undescoring this type of relationship is a street view centered on a flower cart on Washington Market, just south of the Barclay-Vesey Building on West Street (fig. 173). Taken at face value, the photograph appears to be nothing more than the record of a bygone era, a scene vaguely reminiscent of Eugène Atget's Old Paris: a picturesque conglomeration consisting of three disproportionate wheels, wooden boxes, old newspapers, and bunches of what look like carnations, surmounted by a clumsy handwritten sign, "10¢ Roses 10¢," notable for its clumsily-oversized "R." Looming high in the background and clearly intended as a counterpoint to the flower cart is the silhouette of the 29-story Transportation Building on Broadway, standing next to the 18-story Underwood Building (the Woolworth Building, just to the left, is not shown). Contrary to the Maine Monument on Columbus Circle, where Evans set up a clash between the sculptures in the foreground and the office buildings in the distance, here the push cart and the skyscraper seem to mirror each other, as if governed by a similar logic of vertical growth. It was left to the viewer to decide whether the unstable, haphazard structure of the cart, significantly bearing the inscription "730 E. 6St" (probably the owner's address in Alphabet City), would succumb to the rational design and the slender elegance of setback architecture.

One further example of Evans's strategy of recombining heterogeneous signs of the city's history is a sequence of three negatives taken on West 96th Street, showing a pullcart parked behind a 1931 Chevrolet Cabriolet, with an elderly man wearing patched trousers and a sagging jacket standing in front of them (fig. 528). While the incongruousness of old and new, vernacular and modern, is definitely the subject of the scene,

Evans seemed to be attracted by minor details that subtly undermined the most obvious dualistic reading, such as the formal similarity of the curved wooden handles of the pull cart with the chromed landau bars of the fashonable Chevrolet. The sequence shows how Evans gradually clarified this theme, adjusting his vantage point to achieve a greater level of precision in the description of the scene, leaving just enough perspectival space between the handles of the cart and the rear of the car. In the final photograph, a further association is suggested between the sinuous configuration in the foreground and the arched roof of the awning across the street. It would be easy to over-interpret the meaning of these formal associations, but it is worth noting that Evans continued to explore the potential of visual synthesis for a long time afterwards. For example, in a short text accompanying a 1951 portfolio entitled "The Wreckers," he described a demolition site as "just a flat open space strewn with ground-leavings – two thirds of a plaster acanthus, a serpent of electric wire from 1903, one ormulu table leg, a chipped porcelain plaque marked EXIT."[157] Here, as on 96th Street, the precise linkage between disparate fragments of the city's past created a poetic rhythm that triggered the fantasy of a surreal object: fiction based on fact, or the preconization of a late-1950s combine painting by Robert Rauschenberg.

3.3 Urban relics

In closing this discussion of Evans's imagery of the modern skyscraper seen from street level, we can now return to the category of photographic "Abstractions + Details" and consider a relatively large group of images taken at various times and locations, depicting not the city's buildings and spaces, but its surfaces and textures.[158]

157. Walker Evans, "The Wreckers," *Fortune*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (May 1951), p. 103.
158. See WEA 1994.250.8 (8).

Included in this genre are details of a drain cover (fig. 666) and of a metal grate (fig. 670), the regular pattern of a cobblestone street (fig. 664), a door mat (fig. 668), the geometry of railway tracks seen from above (fig. 59) and from below (fig. 524), the side of a steamship (fig. 29), the curves of a grain elevator (fig. 624). Taken individually, these photographs are difficult to decipher. On the one hand, their inherent lack of contextual information seems to annihilate their documentary value; on the other, they hardly seem to aspire to the status of self-sufficient abstraction that one can detect, for instance, in Paul Strand's most radical compositions of 1916 (fig. 667). Independently from their scale of observation, however, Evans's photographs never fail to convey the tactile physicality of urban objects that form the fabric of everyday experience. As Kirstein wrote in his afterward to *American Photographs*, Evans distanced himself from the average "self-styled artist-photographer" and from the obvious "capturing of indiscriminate surfaces, textures, patterns and promiscuous abstract or concrete objects."[159] The example of *Wall Street Windows* has shown to what extent these details of the built environment could negotiate issues of surface, space, and urban experience, in ways that echoed parallel debates on the relationship between structure and decoration in modern art and architecture (figs. 98). Most of Evans's early work challenges the limits of a purely photo-historical perspective, thus requiring a cross-disciplinary consideration of the overlapping discourses of photography, art, architecture, and American life that coalesced to shape a "Transatlantic" version of modernism.

A first step towards a fuller understanding of Evans's formal close-ups, then, is to see them in the context of his reading of the modern city that we have attempted to reconstruct so far. Some, like the radiating structure of a battered wagon wheel (fig. 610), belong to larger series exploring different aspects of the same site: walking through Brooklyn's Wallabout Market, Evans took time to study the relationship between the parked wagons and the buildings in the background, the play of the longitudinal planks

159. Kirstein, *Photographs of America,* p. 190.

with their shadows cast on the rugged terrain of the plaza, and the worn-out, splintered wood that spoke of bygone times.[160]

Several other photographs in the Walker Evans Archive, including those recording vendor carts in Manhattan that we have just considered and a portait of a delivery man standing on a similar wagon published in *Hound & Horn* in 1933 (fig. 607), indicate that Evans's interest rested less on formal concerns than on the radical transformation of American vernacular culture of 1920s America.

While change entailed the replacement of recognizable urban objects – brownstones superseded by skyscrapers, horse wagons by trucks and automobiles, billboards by neon signs – it also affected the very matter of the city, the fabric of everyday perception. Janet Ward, in her groundbreaking study on the architecture of Weimar Germany, has emphasized the consequences of this "architectural shift toward the display of bare surface" as an anticipation of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.[161] A proper assessment of the role played by photography as a mediator in this process, however, is still wanting. For example, issues of surface and space were at the core of Moholy-Nagy's artistic work since the late 1910s, including paintings, light sculptures, photomontages, photograms, and straight photographs, such as *Gutter* (1925) (fig. 665). Photographs also played a key role in his theory of "the material" as "precisely those values which are firmly anchored in the elemental," which he fully developed in *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929).[162] According to Moholy-Nagy, "Documentary exact photographs of material (tactile) values, the magnification of their forms of appearance, scarcely

160. For this iconography of the area, see "Wallabout Market," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 2, 1898, p. 17.

161. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), esp. pp. 56ff; Monika Wagner, "Berlin Urban Spaces as Social Surfaces: Machine Aesthetics and Surface Texture", *Representations*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 53–75.

162. Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, p. 8.

noticed before, inspire almost every observer – not only the handworker – to experiment with the tactile function."[163]

Photographs were largely used by architectural critics and historians to illustrate the evolution of the physical environment in the modern era, as in Sigfried Giedion's *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (1928), who observed: "The street has been transformed into a stream of movement. Rail lines and trains, together with the railroad station, form a single whole."[164] Photographers often interacted with these theories and actively contributed to modifying established patterns of visual apprehension. Giedion's notion of the interpenetration (*Durchdringung*) of mass and surface in modern architecture can be seen at play in Germaine Krull's portfolio *Métal* (1928), a sequence of 64 unbound plates of industrial subjects ranging from close-up details of heavy machinery to worm's-eye views of iron structures such as the Eiffel Tower.[165] In his preface to the series, French critic Florent Fels praised Krull's photographs as "sonnets with sharp and luminous rhymes" that had the power to transform the grimness of industry into a vision of terrible beauty: "Steel is transforming our landscapes. Forests of pylons replace old-age trees. Blast furnaces supplant hills. [...] Confronted with a milling machine covered with oil sludge, lifeless debris, and streaming water, one thinks of Dostoyevsky."[166]

At the same time records and embodiments of a new regime of the surface, photographs were seen as the perfect medium for a new haptic experience of the city. From

163. Ibid., p. 26.

164. Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928), p. 6, quoted in Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 35. Giedion's use of photography is discussed in *Sigfried Giedion und die Fotografie: Bildinszenierungen der Moderne,* edited by Werner Oechslin and Gregor Harbusch (Zurich: GTA Verlag, 2010).

165. Germaine Krull, *Métal* (Paris: Librairie des Arts Décoratifs, 1928). See Kim Sichel, *Germaine Krull: Photographer of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 325, n. 52.

166. Florent Fels, Preface to *Métal*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, in *Photography in the Modern Era,* p. 14.

this perspective, Evans's "abstractions" function as specimens of urban materials in his multiscale exploration of the modern city, but they also carried a specific cultural value as traces of a rapidly changing *Zeitgeist*. Thus Evans's interest in urban timber structures appears to signal the end of an older civilization that artists like Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth could still celebrate in provincial Pennsylvania towns like Doylestown or Lancaster (fig. 143). Wood would resurface in Evans's last phase of work in New York, around 1934, as a symbol of decay and of the Depression (fig. 597).

In tune with the current trends of international photography at the end of the 1920s exemplified by Krull's portfolio, it was mostly iron and steel that attracted Evans's eye. At least three photographs taken on the Brooklyn Bridge, including one portraying a horse-cart framed by the bridge trussing (fig. 60), appear to complement the three stylized images illustrating Hart Crane's poem of 1930 with observations on the ordinary life and matter of the bridge. Similar ideas can be found in a claustrophobic image of Theatre Alley (just behind the Park Row Building) where Evans pictured a network of fire escapes obstructing the view (fig. 162), a theme that he had already recorded in *Wall Street Windows* (figs. 98–100) and that Berenice Abbott had also explored in the same years (fig. 163). While the geometry of the staircases and the obscurity of the alley may remind of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* (fig. 136), it is again in Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika* that we can find a plausible precursor for this view of unplanned urban congestion.[167] In his book, the German architect devoted two photographs (taken in Chicago) to this particular space of the new city, presented as "The dark shaft in which the newborn skyscraper, sparkling white in the sunlight, stands out promisingly and redeemingly" (fig. 165).[168] Evans added his typical ironic twist to Mendelsohn's analysis of the inadequacies of American city planning, replacing the

167. Elizabeth Mary André, *Fire Escapes in Urban America: History and Preservation*, Master's Thesis, The University of Vermont, 2006.

168. Mendelsohn, *Amerika,* pp. 145, 151.

redeeming light and the rational geometry of modern architecture with a tall "RESTAURANT" sign incongruously attached to a blank, windowless façade.

Finally, Evans's ability to grasp the generative potential of the particular can be seen at work in two outstanding photographs of metal objects salvaged from the debris of the city (figs. 301, 303). *Stamped Tin Relic* (1929) and *Tin Relic* (1930) are two images figuring prominently in Evans's 1938 retrospective book, *American Photographs,* as the opening and closing images of Part Two. They both show scraps of cheap imitative ornaments traditionally employed as embellishments of building façades, photographed in direct sunlight with a large-format camera to enhance their tactile qualities and their unassuming beauty. In the former, contorted sheets of pressed metal mimic the capitals of two Ionic columns and acanthus leaves: possibly found among the squatters' colonies on the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, it is a triumph of materials and textures, including pocked steel, peeling paint, bits of splintered wood, and shards of plaster. In the latter, taken on the roof of Hanns Skolle's apartment at 92 Fifth Avenue, metal has been cut and bent to a voluptuous spiralling shape ending in a tin rosette, much smaller and off center; while the raking light gives relief to the crackles in the paint, it also casts a large, somber shadow emanating from the center of the composition, a puddle of darkness with no apparent depth.

Taken as specimens in a collection of urban materials, these relics record a civilization that was fast disappearing by the time Evans began to photograph in New York. Ada Louise Huxtable has characterized this type of ersatz materials – such as concrete blocks, linoleum, pressed metal ceilings, embossed wall coverings – as "substitute gimcrackery," a kind of decoration highly favored among middle-class homeowners for their cheapness and practicality.[169] "Tin ceilings," as they were popularly known and advertised, were actually made of nobler metals, such as zinc, steel, and iron; produced

169. Quoted in Pamela H. Simpson, *Cheap, Quick, & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870–1930* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), p. 1 and *passim*.

in a variety of standardized shapes and patterns, they became a common feature in the 1880s, but were on the wane fifty years later.[170]

The moral judgment pronounced by Ada Louise Huxtable in 1960 was in line with a century-old debate about industry and art initiated by Pugin and developed by John Ruskin, who in 1858 delivered an illustrated lecture entitled "The Work of Iron, in Nature, Art, and Policy."[171] In it, Ruskin lamented the tendency of the "moderns" to contradict the basic formal principles of materials, leading sculptors to carve fine lace into heavy stone, or ironsmiths to beat the ends of iron bars to shape thin leaves. Sixty year later, this discussion on the relationship between art and industry was revamped, among others, by Lewis Mumford. Writing in *The New Republic* in 1921, the urban critic joined his predecessors in lamenting the "vague excrescences, like ferrous foliage" of the machine style, reminding modern architects that "The iron cornucopias and flowers that Ruskin railed at, for example, typify this weak attempt to mollify the machine; and the flowery decorations that one can still see on some old model of the typewriter arose out of the same pathetic fallacy."[172]

Seen from this perspective, photographs like *Tin Relic* and *Stamped Tin Relic* stand out as emblematic responses to the issue of technology's pervasiveness, positing as they do a continuum of organic and artificial, originality and ersatz, reality and its image. Yet contrary to Ruskin, Huxtable, and Mumford, Evans's interest in the manifestations of popular culture was untainted by didacticism: his use of the expression "tin relic," if potentially elegiac, implied an archaeological stance, especially in the light of the

170. Ibid., pp. 53, 71. See also Margot Gayle, David W. Look, John G. Waite, *Metals in America's Historic Buildings: Uses and Preservation Treatments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources, Preservation Assistance, 1992), pp. 12–21.

171. John Ruskin, *The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art, and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture, Delivered in 1858–9* (London: Smith, Edler and Co., 1859), pp. 187–250.

172. Lewis Mumford, "Machinery and the Modern Style," *The New Republic*, Vol. 27, No. 348 (August 3, 1921), p. 265. See also Ibid., *Sticks and Stones*, p. 179.

detached style that characterizes both photographs.[173] In *American Photographs,* Alan Trachtenberg has aptly noted, Evans's relics signalled a cycle of decay and rejuvenation, framing "a world of matter shaped by culture to human use – a fallen world of unredeemed (we might also say alienated) objects scattered in a fragmented landscape."[174] Discussing the 1930 version of *Tin Relic*, Trachtenberg underscores the layered meanings inscribed in a photographic print recording a metal artifact that in turn is the copy of a natural object: at their best, Evans's images develop chains of dialectical connections that question accepted notions of "originality" and eventually undermine their own conditions of existence.

This conceptual turn resurfaces at key points in *American Photographs,* periodically restating the artistic value of the straight photograph as a conscious act of incorporation (and thus, of redemption) of vernacular culture.[175] And yet in the context of Evans's early work these two photographs stand out as carriers of larger artistic implications: as in *Wall Street Windows* (taken at about the same time), the simple act of sampling a portion of the urban skin entailed a recapitulation and a reassessment of a whole set of modernist issues that were at center of the debate of the 1920s and '30s. From this perspective, the continuity in subject matter between the two versions of *Tin Relic* is

173. The expression "tin relic," coined by Evans, was not commonly in use in the 1920s: for a rare occurrence, see Sydney Valentine, "The Servant Problem," *Photoplay*, Vol. 18, No. 5 (October 1920), p. 66.

174. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 277. The same frontal attitude of Evans's relics can be found in another memorable record of a false tin façade redeemed by the light found in Moundville, Alabama, in 1936, but not included in *American Photographs* (WEA 1994.258.290).

175. Following on this track, we could add that Evans was probably aware of the importance of tintypes for the popular diffusion of the medium in 19th-century America. Evans's family photographs dating from the second half of the 19th century, now in the Walker Evans Archive, include several tintypes; three more can be found among the photographs that he collected over the years (WEA 1994.263.194.1–3). Also, a tintype photographer working on Bleecker Street was the subject of a substantial series of candid shots taken by Evans in 1933–34 (fig. 201).

contradicted by a decisive change of focus from the reproduction of surface values to the consideration of more sophisticated issues of volume and depth. At least seven variant negatives in the Walker Evans Archive show that Evans, in a rather exceptional instance of manipulation verging on still life, moved and reframed the metal ornament of *Tin Relic* in order to experiment with the volumetric effect of shadow and light on its protruding parts and on the concave space at its center. These very issues were at the core of modernist European painting and sculpture of the prewar era: the reconfiguration of everyday materials, the formal rigor of the composition, and the dialogue between abstract and naturalistic elements are all characters of Synthetic Cubism, and it is tempting to draw a parallel between *Tin Relic* and Pablo Picasso's cardboard *Guitar* of 1912, remade in 1914 using sheet metal and wire (fig. 305), were it not for the fact that this specific construction remained relatively obscure until the 1960s.[176] While *Tin Relic* may not necesssarily reference any specific work, Evans's acquaitance with artists working in New York, such as Stefan Hirsch and Hart Crane, probably exposed him to the shifting iconography of international modernism introduced in the United States by Alfred Stieglitz and later developed by immigrant intellectuals of the 1920s. The theme of the rosette, for instance, figures prominently in a 1913 painting by Marsden Hartley, *Abstraction with Flowers*, but the graphic simplification of Louis Lozowick's "machine ornaments" also comes to mind (figs. 306, 307).[177]

The most significant implications of *Tin Relic*, however, can be found in the literary field. As William Rozaitis has shown, flowers played a significant role as metaphors of

176. Anne Umland, *Picasso: Guitars, 1912–1914* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011), p. 27. One of Picasso's cardboard guitars was reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 1 (December 1924), p. 19, which Evans may have seen during the year he spent in Paris, in 1926–27. It should be added that in the 1910s other important artists experimented with abstract sculpture based on sheet metal: Vladimir Tatlin's "counter-reliefs" are a case in point.

177. Crane, who had become acquainted with Hartley in Marseille in 1929, began to collaborate with Evans on his return to New York shortly thereafter. See *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916–1932*, edited by Brom Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1965), p. 342.

the contradictions of modern life in the early 20th-century poetry, embodying binary values such as those of transcendence and materiality, lightness and weight, novelty and nostalgia, modernity and anti-modernism.[178] As an example, he mentions e.e. cumming's first published book, significantly titled *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), in which the main key is a "simultaneous backward and forward looking" in a "collection of chimneys, prostitutes, and drunkards [that] at one time *was* a garden."[179] Similar literary associations were not unknown among painters: in *Farewell to Union Square,* by realist painter Morris Kantor (1931), three roses superimposed upon a drab urban window view appear as narrative symbols of a last backward glance before an escape from the city. The view from above is thus transfigured into an image of the past, or even into a frozen reproduction of the city itself.[180]

Even more interesting, the image of the flower was employed by writers and poets as a paradoxical emblem of the metropolis itself. Countering a tradition established by Henry James, who in *The American Scene* had described the Manhattan skyline as a "pin-cushion in profile," Lindley Hubbell's poem "New York" (published in 1931) offered a lyrical view of the sharp-edged efflorence of skyscrapers sculpted by the glaring light:

> The city rises from the sea like an iron lily.
> The city opens to the light like a cluster of metal flowers, rigid on the stem.
> As a pool is fragrant with water lilies, so has the ocean brought forth
> Flowers without essence to pierce the air like blades.

178. William A. Rozaitis, *Desire Reduced to a Petal's Span: William Carlos Williams, Charles Demuth, and Floral Representation in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century America*, PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997, pp. 114 ff.

179. Ibid., p. 112.

180. Kantor's recollection of this symbolic meaning is quoted in Bruce Weber, *Paintings of New York, 1800–1950* (Chesterfield, Mass.: Chameleon Books, 2005), p. 56.

For miles around the islands shed cold cluster upon the wave,
And in the center, like a flower or a gem harder than a flower,
The great lily, the lily of marble and steel
Cutting the air with its petals.

Surely the heart is made whole that has beheld,
Perfect upon the stem, this flower.[181]

In 1925, at the time when he was writing this poem, Hubbell worked with Evans in the Map Room of the New York Public Library, sharing with him an admiration for Joyce and a passion for Manhattan.[182] *Tin Relic* and "New York" also show a similar appreciation for the arresting quality of sunlight, a precisionist sensibility that allowed both artists to distil essential images from the materials of the city. It is this same exactness of observation that Evans infused in his translation of "Mad" published in 1929, an excerpt from Blaise Cendrars's novel *Moravagine* that anticipates the trimness of *Tin Relic*: "Your body is like an egg by the side of the sea. You are as concentrated as a salt jewel and as transparent as rock crystal. You are a prodigious flowering, a motionless vortex."[183]

Other, more influential writers were working in the same vein, such as the "objectivist" poets gathered around the figures of William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofksy,

181. Lindley Williams Hubbell, "New York," in *The Tracing of a Portal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), p. 14. The book's title is a quotation from Wallace Stevens's poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1915).

182. Alice Hudson, "A Brief History of the New York Public Library Map Division," Meridian, No. 13 (1998), p. 6; Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 24. For Hubbell's knowledge of Joyce and for his personal correspondence with Gertrude Stein, see Ulla E. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp. 12 ff.

183. Blaise Cendrars, "Mad," trans. Walker Evans, *Alhambra*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August 1929), p. 46. See Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 35.

and Marianne Moore, whose program entailed a "Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars."[184] Williams, among them, deserves particular attention: in the opening verse of "The Flower," a poem published by the short-lived magazine *U.S.A.* in the Spring 1930, he transfigured the elongated towers of a bridge under construction in the distance (possibly the George Washington Bridge across the Hudson River) into "A petal, colorless and without form."[185] Contrary to Hubbell's "iron lily," Williams's flower did not promise any redemption. Written in the first person, the poem expressed frustration for the inability of the protagonist to write at the same pace of the growing city; at the same time, it stated the poet's fierce repudiation of its powers: "But foolish to rhapsodize over / strings of lights, the blaze of a power / not my own, in which I have not / the least part."

It is very likely that Evans read "The Flower" with some interest: he had been acquainted with Williams since 1929 through their common friend, the poet Hart Crane, and he himself was going to contribute two photographs to the magazine's next issue.[186] William's verses "strings of lights, the blaze of a power / not my own" expressed the same disavowal of the metropolis that Evans manifested in his own poetic fragments – "the filthy punctured cubes of the city" – of about the same time.[187] Williams's poem

184. Louis Zukofsky, "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931," *Poetry*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (February 1931), p. 268. See also Henry M. Sayre, "American Vernacular: Objectivism, Precisionism, and the Aesthetics of the Machine," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 3, William Carlos Williams Issue (Autumn 1989), pp. 310–42.

185. William Carlos Williams, "The Flower," *U.S.A.: A Quarterly Magazine of the American Scene*, No. 1 (Spring 1930), p. 31.

186. According to the credit line, "Walker Evans contributed the photograph of *Brooklyn Bridge* on the cover, as well as the study entitled *Sky Webs*. He studied in Europe, experimented for several years and now has set out to interpret with vivid and fresh inspiration the scene of which he is a product.": *U.S.A.: A Quarterly Magazine of the American Scene*, No. 2 (Summer 1930), p. 117. On Evans's meeting with Williams and other protagonists of New York's literary scene in 1929, see Mellow, *Walker Evans,* p. 104.

187. See above, p. 107.

offers precise images that a photographer might have appreciated, such as "a heap of dirt, if you care / to say it, frozen and sunstreaked in / the January sun, returning," even if "The flower" itself progressively loses its material qualities after the first line, as "This / is no more a romance than an allegory."

It is in another poem by Williams, originally included in *Spring and All* (1923), that we can find an almost complete correspondence with (and possibly a direct antecedent of) the visual and tactile qualities of *Tin Relic*. The seventh of the book's untitled poems opened with the verses "The rose is obsolete / but each petal ends in / an edge, the double facet / cementing the grooved / columns of air" and continued by transforming the actual rose into a sharp-edged metallic object: "Somewhere the sense / makes copper roses / steel roses –."[188] Evans may have had these lines in mind when he set up his camera on the roof of 92 Fifth Avenue, closing in on his modern relic and readjusting it in the appropriate light so that its bare structure could be recorded in all its apparent matter-of-factness. A comparison of the surviving negatives shows that Evans intentionally elided marginal information that would have characterized the relic as a mere scrap of metal: this is particularly noticeable in the lower section of the photograph, where selective framing created the illusion of an unbroken curve spiralling toward the rosette (figs. 301, 302). The final effect, with its dynamic geometry revolving around a dark, bottomless shadow, was fully expressed by Williams's verses: "From the petal's edge a line starts / that being of steel / infinitely fine, infinitely / rigid penetrates / the Milky Way."[189]

188. William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (Dijon: Contact, 1923), reprinted in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I, 1909–1939*, edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), pp. 195–96.

189. In 1969, Bram Dijkstra's suggested that the inspiration for "The rose is obsolete" came from a painting by Juan Gris, *Flowers* (1914), based on Williams's known appreciation of the Cubist painter and of a statement on his work immediately preceding the poem in *Spring and All*. While this hypothesis would open up further considerations regarding the visual and literary references of *Tin Relic*, supporting evidence of Dijkstra's claim is still lacking. See Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early*

Perhaps it was not just a fortuitous discovery that in 1938 led Williams to write one of the most insightful reviews of *American Photographs*. In praising Evans's record of "the products and remains of a life that is constantly in process of passing," the poet made specific mention of three photographs, one of them being the book's final image, *Tin Relic*.[190] These photographs, he wrote, were "bred of a place": they offered a "particularization of the universal," an imaginative experience stemming from the forms of ordinary life, as he had explained in *Spring and All* about the work of his favorite painter, Juan Gris.[191] "Let the abstract artist go hang his coat back of the door where he sits down, the abstractions he thinks he is freeing are as definitely bound to a place as the work of the most representational artist," he remarked in an unpublished aside to his comment on *American Photographs*.[192] Whether or not he saw *Tin Relic* as a consequence or even as a homage to his own poetry, Williams was among the few who fully grasped the phenomenological meaning of Evans's urban details.

Poetry of William Carlos Williams: The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 174; an alternative perspective is offered by Charles Altieri, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 41.

190. William Carlos Williams, "Sermon with a Camera," *The New Republic,* Vol. 96, No. 1244 (October 12, 1938), pp. 282–83.

191. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I, 1909–1939*, p. 194. See also *Four Americans in Paris: The Collections of Gertrude Stein and Her Family* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), p. 66.

192. William Carlos Williams Papers, Yale University Library, Box 64, Folder 1347, "Evans, Walker. *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art," quoted in *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*, edited by Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions Book, 1978), p. 138.

CHAPTER FOUR

ICONS OF MODERNITY, II: INDUSTRIAL SUBJECTS

4.1 The industrial city in the age of the machine

Returning to New York in May 1927, Evans found himself immersed in the debate on the industrial civilization that permeated American culture at all levels. Although industry was not in itself an overarching theme in his early investigations, it did play a significant role in the economy of his project on New York, side by side with his predominant images of skyscrapers, urban signs, and New York people. Directly or indirectly, several of his earliest photographs registered the impact of technology on the city. The series of views of the Manhattan skyline taken from the Brooklyn Bridge in the fall of 1928 revolved around the smokestacks of the New York Steam Company on Pearl Street (figs. 15–23), and many photographs of skyscrapers, showing the bare geometry of steel cages under construction, also implied an awareness of technology's aesthetic (figs. 73–74, 375, 515). Other significant expressions of the machine age are evident in Evans's records of power plants (figs. 90, 345, 603), industrial buildings (figs. 627, 656), grain elevators (figs. 624, 658), and the engineering of steamships (figs. 32, 515).

Evans's understanding of industrial forms was largely derived from contemporary discussions in the fields of art and architecture, but he diverged from the prevailing "cult of the machine" in a number of photographs that addressed issues of production, consumption, and spectatorship in the modern metropolis.[1] His awareness of

1. *Cult of the Machine* was the editorial title of a letter that William Faulkner wrote to the *New York Times* in 1954, in which he spoke of "that mystical, unquestioning, almost religious awe and veneration in which our culture has trained us to hold gadgets – any gadget, if it is only complex enough and cryptic enough and costs enough (December 26, 1954, p. E6). The roots of the shift from "the cult

the international discourse on industrial architecture can be inferred, for instance, from two photographs taken in New York and in Montreal depicting grain elevators, a subject that had become rather common in the discussion on functionalism since Walter Gropius's 1913 groundbreaking essay on "the development of modern industrial architecture."[2] In Gowanus, a Brooklyn neighborhood, Evans photographed various aspects of the New York State Canal Terminal and of its surroundings, including conveyors and grain elevators (figs. 621–629). In the summer of 1929, he drove to Canada with Paul Grotz, photographing similar industrial structures in the Montreal harbor (figs. 656, 658).[3] It was probably during the year Evans spent in France that he had become acquainted with magazines like *L'Esprit Nouveau*, in which interdisciplinary analyses of Cubism, Purism, machines, and modern architecture were first published by Jeanneret and Ozenfant.[4] But it was through books like Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923) and Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika* (1926) that Evans, probably under Grotz's tutelage, had an opportunity to gather an intimate knowledge of the language of modern architecture and to meditate on its American version.

of nature" to "the cult of the machine" the American art are traced in Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (1969) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 226.

2. Walter Gropius, "Die Entwicklung moderner Industrie-baukunst," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes: Die Kunst in Industrie und Handel* (1913), pp. 16–22, trans. Ruth Vollmer, "The Development of Modern Industrial Architecture," in *The Literature of Architecture: The Evolution of Architectural Theory and Practice in Nineteenth-century America*, edited by Don Gifford (New York: Dutton, 1966), pp. 618–23. On Gropius's use of photographs, see William J. Brown, "Walter Gropius and Grain Elevators: Misreading Photographs", *History of Photography*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 304-8. For a general discussion, see Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986).

3. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, July 24, 1929 (WEA 1994.260.25 [19]), quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 97.

4. Roberto Gabetti, Carlo Olmo, *Le Corbusier e L'Esprit Nouveau* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975); Stanislaus von Moos, *L'Esprit Nouveau. Le Corbusier et l'industrie, 1920–1925* (Berlin: Wilhem Ernst & Sohn Verlag, 1987).

Translated into English in 1927, *Vers une architecture* offered a provocative discussion of the shortcomings of academic design, supported by a rich visual text that was meant to extol the "engineer's aesthetic" as the most capable of "rewarding the desire of our eyes."[5] Of the "three reminders to architects" presented in the book, the first was devoted to the theme of architectural "mass" and was entirely illustrated with documentary photographs of grain elevators. It seems likely that Evans and Grotz had in mind Le Corbusier's discussion when they began to explore the same subjects in Montreal and Gowanus.[6] A case in point is Evans's "study of industrial architecture," probably taken in 1931, showing the New York State Canal Terminal as a vertical succession of textures and shapes, which can be read as a typically Corbusierian revision of the classical orders of Greek architecture (fig. 624).

A substantial series of photographs of grain elevators was also included in Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, one of the first books to present American industrial architecture within the larger framework of modern urbanism.[7] Although his discussion centered on the aggregation of industrial structures as a consequence of unplanned development (similar in this respect to unbridled urban growth based on the multiplication of skyscrapers), popular commentators tended to focus on the formal qualities of grain elevators. Reviewing the book in 1926, the *New York Times* reproduced a photograph of the Cargill plant in Chicago, followed by an excerpt that read: "The Naked Forms of Utilitarianism Result in an Abstract Beauty."[8] A similar simplification, in fact a

5. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: G. Crès, 1923), trans. Frederick Etchells, *Toward a New Architecture* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1927), p. 16. For the reception of Le Corbusier in the United States, see Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001).

6. Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture*, pp. 25 ff. See also Le Corbusier, Jean-Louis Cohen, and John Goodman, *Toward an Architecture. Texts & documents, 1923* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007).

7. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 110–27.

8. Herman G. Scheffauer, "The Skyscraper Has Found No Favor in European Cities," *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1926, pp. 11, 22. In 1929, few months before Evans's trip to Canada, the

reversal, of Mendelsohn's critique of American urbanism can be seen in a group of etchings that German-born artist Werner Drewes made in 1926, directly after photographs published in *Amerika*.[9] Photographers often adopted a similar stance: images such as William M. Rittase's *The Wheat Comes In*, published in *Fortune* in 1930 (fig. 663), or even Agustín Jiménez's series on the Tolteca cement factory in Mexico City, made in 1931, functioned as reductivist compositions capitalizing on the most obvious aspects of industry's "abstract beauty."[10]

Evans and Grotz, as we have seen in our discussion of the skyscraper, had developed a clear understanding of Mendelsohn's urban vision. However, in Montreal and Gowanus they also seemed attracted by the surface and geometry of grain elevators.[11] Evans's aim, however, was not to impose a purely decorative order on his subject matter, but rather to attain a degree of photographic precision that was consonant with the subject's fundamental visual structure. While also taken frontally, from a short distance, and in direct sunlight, Evans's photographs showed the grain elevators less as geometric shapes than as continuous, undulated façades resulting from the repetition of cylindrical bins – a magnified and mitigated version of the corrugated tin wall underneath (fig. 624). Connected horizontally by linear elements such as conveyor belts, railway tracks,

same image appeared again in the *New York Times*, reproduced almost full-page to illustrate a book review of Julius Klein's *Frontiers of Trade*: William MacDonald, "America in the Market Place," *New York Times*, April 21, 1929, p. 59.

9. Compare, for instance, Drewes's *Grain Elevator V*, 1926 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1969.21.21) and Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 121, showing the Cargill grain elevators in Chicago. For Drewes's work, see Ingrid Rose, *Werner Drewes: A Catalogue Raisonné of His Prints* (Munich and New York: Verlag Kunstgalerie Esslingen, 1984).

10. See "Wheat to Flour to Bread," *Fortune*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (November 1930), p. 85; José Antonio Rodríguez, "Agustín Jiménez: An Investigation Into His Photographic Language," in *Agustín Jiménez: Memoirs of the Avant-Garde* (México: Editorial RM, 2008), pp. 27 ff.

11. In a manuscript list of captions penned around 1933, Evans relied on a purely formal vocabulary to identify his Montreal photographs, "Grain elevator Montreal, curved shadow" (fig. 496) and "Grain elevator Montreal, rectilingular [sic] composition" (fig. 492). See Evans, "Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater," manuscript list, c. 1933, WEA 1994.250.4 (3).

and faux façades, the grain elevators were shown as modular building types that could be potentially orchestrated into a larger scheme. Apparently driven by formal concerns, in fact Evans's photographs addressed the dialectical relationship between large-scale and small-scale forms, structural and non-structural elements, construction and design, stability and movement. As in *Wall Street Windows* (fig. 98), a seemingly decorative image carried encoded meanings for the patient and informed observer.

It should be noted that while most publications of the time discussing Montreal's industrial buildings (including *Vers une architecture*) focused on John S. Metcalf's Grain Elevator No. 2, built in 1912, Evans and Grotz decided instead to explore the Grain Elevator No. 3 and its new extension in the northern section of town, near the Hochelaga Convent. Built in 1928 and totalling 54 bins for an added capacity of two million bushels, the extension was the latest addition to Montreal's industrial skyline when they visited in 1929.[12] It was probably with a sense of presentness and with a particular interest in the process of urban change that Evans chose to depict this structure, just as in the previous months he had privileged Manhattan's newest skyscrapers over the city's established landmarks. Interestingly, his photographs of Grain Elevator No. 3 preceded by a few months Bruno Taut's book, *Die neue Baukunst in Europa und Amerika*, published simultaneously in English at the end of 1929, in which the same structure was illustrated as part of a survey on Montreal's port architecture (fig. 661).[13]

The same combination of vertical and horizontal elements that Evans saw in Montreal's grain elevators, with its thematic and metaphorical implications, can be seen in other photographs of industrial subjects that he took in New York at the end of the

12. Photographic records in the Hayward Studios Collection, Library and Archives Canada, show the original Grain Elevator No. 3 under construction in 1924; the extension photographed by Evans was under construction in the summer of 1928 (PA-059623, PA-059807).

13. Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture* (London and New York: The Studio Ltd. and Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1929), p. 14. Some of the photographs of Montreal's grain elevators reproduced in Taut's book were drawn from *The Growth of a Great Port: Montreal Harbour* (Montreal: Harbour Commissioners, 1927).

1920s. In 1929, for instance, he made a series of studies on the new Squibb Laboratories in Brooklyn, next to his apartment on Columbia Heights. Of the five surviving photographs from that session, three are variations of the building's chimney seen from street level – probably Evans's closest attempt at a "New Objectivity" type of photograph. Although influenced by the precedents of European artists like Sasha Stone and Albert Renger-Patzsch (fig. 561), Evans cunningly included a small but revealing detail of the Brooklyn Bridge in the lower left corner of the scene (fig. 562).[14] That Evans was interested in the dynamics of New York's urban space rather than in merely celebrating the aesthetic of industrial architecture is suggested by the other two photographs of this group, in which the stern geometry of the factory's elevation acted as a mute background to the horizontal order of everyday life – a back street lined up with three-story tenements, punctuated by an incongruously abandoned barrel, a parked car, and some litter (fig. 559).

In a metropolis such as New York, mostly absorbed by the consumption rather than the production of material goods, it was not only the modern factory, but also the power plant that epitomized the new age of the machine. After photographing the New York Steam Company near the Financial District in 1928 (figs. 15–23, 92), Evans investigated the Consolidated Edison Power House on the East River, between 38th and 40th Streets in 1929 and 1930 (figs. 338, 344); at about the same time, he also developed a group of studies of the Brooklyn Power House on Hudson Avenue (figs. 603, 605). Again looking up from a worm's-eye perspective, these photographs showed sets of tall chimneys rising above the skyline like remnants of gigantic Greek temples. Countering the classical order of the smokestacks, a maze of conveyor belts and loading

14. On the iconography of the smokestack, see Wolfgang Hesse, "Schornsteinkrieg: Zu einem Motiv der Arbeiterfotografie," *Volkskunde in Sachsen*, No. 17 (2005), pp. 97–118 and An Paenhuysen, "Berlin in Pictures: Weimar City and the Loss of Landscape," *New German Critique*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 1–25. Albert Renger-Patzsch's icon of the Herrenwyk Blast Furnace Works in Lübeck is reproduced in his best-known book, *Die Welt ist schön* (Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1928), pl. 91, which Evans reviewed in 1931 for the *Hound & Horn*.

towers created a Piranesian drama with no apparent rationality. In Brooklyn, ironically, the plant's chimneys seemed to stem from rows of clotheslines or from a forest of ship masts (fig. 606). Later on, in the early 1930s, Evans revisited these themes in the frontal, classical style that characterized his mature work. In a photograph taken from South Street, the massive smokestack of the New York Steam Company, towering above the dilapidated buildings in the foreground, was mockingly echoed by a slim rain gutter running down along the opposite side of the picture (fig. 262).

Since the late 1920s, the urban externalities of power plants had been put under public scrutiny. In 1928, the Murray Hill Association and several East 39th and 40th Street residents had filed an action against the proposed extension of the Con Ed building, on the basis that it would create a nuisance for the neighborhood and that it would "initiate an invasion by business of a residence district."[15] At the same time, the iconography of New York's power plants established by technical documents and company reports was being reshaped by artists interested in the cultural value of the machine.[16] As writer Jean Toomer remarked in an open letter to Gorham Munson published in the little magazine *S4N* in 1923, "I had been in every powerhouse in the city years before I dragged myself into the Corcoran Gallery."[17] In January 1929, a drawing of the Con Ed plant by artist Earl Horter illustrated an advertisement page for the Vacuum Oil Company (fig. 342).[18] A year later, a modernist photograph of the same building by Martin Bruehl made the cover of the magazine *Advertising & Selling* (fig. 343); within

15. "Fight Power Plant in East 40th Street," *New York Times*, May 25, 1928, p. 43.

16. For examples of the official iconography of New York's power plants, see the photographs reproduced in the annual reports of the Consolidated Gas Company of New York for the years 1928–1933. One such photograph, published in 1936, was the basis for Charles Sheeler's painting *Steam Turbine*, 1939 (Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, 950-0-111).

17. Jean Toomer, "Open Letter to Gorham B. Munson," *S4N*, Vol. 4, No. 25 (March-April 1923), n.p.

18. "This Will Interest Your Engineers," advertisement page, *Nation's Business*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1929), p. 4. Earl Horter (1881-1940) was a painter of urban subjects, including *The Chrysler Buiding Under Construction*, 1931 (Whitney Museum of American Art, 78.17).

months, Evans's close variant of the same scene was published in *Architectural Record,* as part of a group of five "architectural studies."[19] Also in 1930, the Con Ed building was the subject of a lithograph by Howard Cook (fig. 346), which in turn may have inspired a 1938 view by Berenice Abbott (fig. 347).

An inescapable photographic precedent of Evans's photographs of New York industries was the series on the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant made by Charles Sheeler in 1927. Working on commission from the N. W. Ayer advertising firm of Philadelphia, Sheeler had spent six weeks in Detroit, producing over thirty memorable photographs of the factory's smokestacks, its monumental interiors, and its machinery.[20] Over the years, many of these iconic images were exhibited, published, and typically reworked by Sheeler as drawings or paintings, contributing to his recognition as a "Precisionist" artist and significantly shaping the image of American industry. Among the best known photographs from this series is *Criss-Crossed Conveyors* (fig. 340): reproduced full-page in the February 1928 issue of *Vanity Fair*, it was presented by the magazine editors as "an American altar of the God-Objective of Mass Production."[21] The following year, six photographs from the N. W. Ayer commission were published in *transition* under the title "The Industrial Mythos." By juxtaposing the complementary symbols of the smokestack and the crucible, the series underscored the dialectical relationship between the factory's exterior and interior forms, its classical forms and its dramatic environment. In his brief introduction, Eugène Jolas wrote of the "plastic objectivity" of Sheeler's eye, but also praised the "dynamic magic" and "revelation of the fantastic" of his pictures – a critical vocabulary borrowed from the writings of French

19. Compare Bruehl's photograph reproduced in *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (January 8, 1930) and Walker Evans, "Architectural Studies," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (September 1930), p. 197. It is unclear whether the strong similarity between the two pictures implies a collaboration between the photographers.

20. Mary Jane Jacob and Linda Downs, *The Rouge: The Image of Industry in the Art of Charles Sheeler and Diego Rivera* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978), p. 12.

21. "By Their Works Ye Shall Know Them," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (February 1928), p. 62.

art critic Pierre Mac Orlan.[22] Two years later – at a time when the artist was developing his famous industrial paintings, such as *American Landscape* (1930) and *Classic Landscape* (1931) – the River Rouge series was the subject of an appreciative article in *Creative Art*, in which dealer and art critic Samuel Kootz, making no reference to their date and *raison d'être*, presented the photographs as purely artistic expressions: "The fine drawing, the athletic tenseness of line, the plastic sequences, the exquisite textures, the intricate rhythms, are as sure, as conscious, as the best modern painting."[23]

As Karen Lucic has observed, while artists like Francis Picabia "satirize[d] the machine, and by extension, contemporary society's fetishization of it," Sheeler's photographs expressed an unwavering faith in the power of technology, a belief that in the 1920s was part and parcel of America's national identity.[24] Incidentally, Sheeler was a member of the artists' committee of the Machine-Age Exposition, together with other visual artists like Louis Lozowick, Charles Demuth, and Ralph Steiner. It is thus tempting to read Lozowick's contribution to the exhibition catalogue, "The Americanization of Art," as an anticipation of Sheeler's photographs and of their implicit significance:

> The dominant trend in America of today, beneath all the apparent chaos and confusion[,] is towards order and organization which find their outward sign and symbol in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares

22. Eugène Jolas, "Charles Sheeler: The Industrial Mythos," *transition*, No. 18 (November 1929), p. 123. Speaking of "Sheeler's magic realism," Jolas evoked Mac Orlan's concept of "fantastique social," while at the same time referring to Franz Roh's groundbreaking essay *Nach-Expressionismus: magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925).

23. Samuel M. Kootz, "Ford Plant Photos of Charles Sheeler," *Creative Art*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (April 1931), pp. 264–67 (quotation p. 265).

24. Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 11.

of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks.

Upon this underlying mathematical pattern as a scaffolding may be built a solid plastic structure of great intricacy and subtlety."[25]

Similar ideas affected the literary world as well. The poet MacKnight Black, for example, also visited the Ford plant in 1927, also on commission from N. W. Ayer & Son, and probably became acquainted with Sheeler on that occasion.[26] In 1928, Black published his first poems inspired by the Rouge, in which he crafted a new industrial pastoral based on a harmonic convergence between the perfection of the machine, the harmony of nature, and human life.[27] Thus in "Power-House":

Here, as where the measured sun
Hammers the cold earth with Springs unending,
A piston beats immobile steel
To flight as fertile as awakened lands.
This covered place is splendid as a sky,
This pounded wheel blooms like the earth;
Whoever stands here must be moved

25. Lozowick, "The Americanization of Art," pp. 18–19.

26. The possible point of contact is suggested by Susan Fillin-Yeh, "Charles Sheeler's *Upper Deck*," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 53, No. 5 (January 1979), p. 94. Black was a member of the editorial board of *U.S.A.*, a magazine "of the American scene" co-directed by Vaughn Flannery (the art editor of the N. W. Ayer firm) that in 1930 published two photographs by Evans. It is possible that Evans crossed paths with MacKnight Black in 1930, when he briefly collaborated with the N. W. Ayer company. See letter, Evans to Skolle, June 19, 1930 and Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 76.

27. Black's first poems on the skyscraper were written in 1924–1925: see William Sharpe, "MacKnight Black and American Futurism," in *Poetry and the Fine Arts: Papers from the Poetry Sessions of the European Association for American Studies Biennial Conference, Rome 1984*, edited by Roland Hagenbüchle and Jacqueline S. Ollier (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1989), pp. 166–79.

Deep in his blood, as when he stands
And stares across live April fields
Beneath the steady lightning of the sun.[28]

Black's belief in the machine was fully articulated in two collections of poems entirely devoted to the manifestations of modern technology, including engines, skyscrapers, bridges, and trains: *Machinery*, completed in 1929, and *A Thrust at the Sky*, published posthumously in 1932. In addition to describing the beauty of the machine, Black's lyrics sang an ontological allegiance between technology and the cosmos. In "Suspension Bridge at Evening," an epigrammatic quartine in which form and meaning were masterfully brought to a synthesis, the poem's nominal subject was neither described nor evoked, but wholly identified ("Precision on precision") with the rays of light emanating from the evening star: "One projected star, the first of night, / Slides pale rays down – / Precision on precision, / Bare."[29] Similarly, the city "parallels" mentioned by Lozowick found a correspondence in Black's "Railway Tracks": "The bare tracks flow onward in silence / And cut into space like beams thrown ahead of a star."[30]

Writing in 1949, Frederick J. Hoffman criticized Black's fascination for the machine as an instance of the "technological fallacy," a self-deception that in his opinion affected much of the poetry of the 1920s. Black, Hoffman claimed, poeticized the industrial world on account of "its freedom from the complicated and ambiguous nature of human behavior," but in so doing he betrayed "a naïveté or a blindness concerning the machine's position and function in modern life."[31] Similar observations can be made about the work of visual artists, although a further element can explain their enthrallment

28. MacKnight Black, "Poems of the Machine Age – Power-House," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (September 8, 1928), p. 101.

29. MacKnight Black, *Machinery* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), p. 55.

30. Ibid., p. 58.

31. Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Technological Fallacy in Contemporary Poetry: Hart Crane and MacKnight Black," *American Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1949), pp. 94–107 (quotation p. 101).

with the machine. Like many of his contemporaries, Sheeler was trying to shape an art of the commonplace that found its nourishment in ordinary experience rather than in academic (or even anti-academic) principles – an agenda for American art and photography that proved to be fruitful for decades to come. Although working in different media and coming from a different background, Black, Sheeler, and Lozowick shared similar persuasions toward technology, not simply in terms of formal beauty and material progress but also, and most importantly, as a heuristic principle that had the power to clarify the experience of everyday life, direct the creative process, and avoid certain affectations of a "socially engaged" or "popular" art. With the onset of the Depression, Lozowick and other artists of his generation modified their attitude, for example introducing a new iconography of labor to counterbalance their enthusiasm for the machine. Sheeler, on the contrary, continued to assert his allegiance to the ordering values of technology well into the 1950s, when he continued to rework his iconography of the machine age in a more complex and allusive language.[32]

Active in photography, painting, and film, close to the Société Anonyme, founded in 1920 by Katherine Dreier and Marcel Duchamp, widely exhibited and published, Sheeler played a significant role throughout the decade for his intermediary position between the classicism of Alfred Stieglitz and the modernism of the avant-garde, and for his sustained interest in urban themes. Evans's photographs of the Consolidated Edison Power House, with their geometric composition of smokestacks and belt conveyors, can be seen as a response to Sheeler's *Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, just as his studies of the Park Row Building discussed above probably developed from an attempt to find new visual solutions to the issues posed by Sheeler's photograph of the same building in 1920 (figs.

32. Barbara Zabel, "Louis Lozowick and Urban Optimism of the 1920s," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1974), pp. 17–21; Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, p. 102. For a different perspective of Sheeler's "optimism," based on the critical thinking of Adorno, see Mark Rawlinson, "Charles Sheeler's Imprecise Precisionism," *Comparative American Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 2004), pp. 470–86.

148–153, 155).[33] Despite the obvious similarities, however, what distinguished Evans's attitude from the strict formalizations of Sheeler and of later urban photographers like Margaret Bourke-White was a fundamental belief in the photograph as a subjective act of observation and as a fragment of a larger visual text. Missing from Evans's style of this early period were the formal boldness, the assertiveness, the "rigid geometry" (in Lozowick's terms), and the fundamental aspiration to beauty that Sheeler shared with modernist photographers of the East Coast occasionally attracted by industrial subjects, such as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Willard Van Dyke, and Alma Lavenson.[34] Again, although Evans did photograph many aspects of the city listed in Lozowick's plea for an "American" art – "the vertical of its smoke stacks," but also "the parallels of its car tracks" (fig. 59) and "the squares of its streets" (fig. 373) – his aim was not to create a catalog of modernist forms, but rather to develop a visual text in which the contradictions and the complexities of the modern metropolis could be exposed without necessarily being subjugated to the master narrative of progress. That Evans's project never found a settled form – except for a revealing series of 36 photographs devised around 1933, which will be discussed in the next chapter – is consistent with his precocious understanding of the medium as a powerful tool of visual interrogation and of his own art as a skeptical discourse unconcerned with the task of providing explanatory or even satisfying answers.

33. In 1947, working on commission for *Fortune* magazine, Evans made an extensive series of photographs of the River Rouge Plant that partly paid homage to Sheeler's precedent.Although his closest variant of *Criss-Crossed Conveyors* (fig. 341) was not included in the final publication, one of the five published photographs ("Quiet Flows the Rouge") can be read as a less obvious citation from Sheeler's canvas *American Landscape*, 1930. See "The Rebirth of Ford," *Fortune*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (May 1947), pp. 81–89.

34. For a survey, see Karen Tsujimoto, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). In 1933, Evans judged the work of Ansel Adams "careful, studied, weak Strand, self-conscious, mostly utterly pointless. An abandoned steam roller, quite beautiful, in the middle of a desert, titled 'Capitalism 1933'": letter, Walker Evans to Jay Leyda, November 22, 1933, quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 217–18.

Like many artists committed to urban themes, Evans worked at the intersection of various practices and sympathized with magazines that fostered a cross-disciplinary debate on the machine age. His pre-photographic education, as we have seen, was influenced by the forerunners of this approach, including *The Soil*, *The Little Review*, *La Révolution surréaliste*, and *Der Querschnitt*. At the end of the 1920s, he was quick to grasp the importance of a new generation of little magazines – such as *Alhambra*, *U.S.A.*, and *Hound & Horn* – that could present his multilayered records of the modern city without the simplifications of specialized periodicals like *Creative Art* and *Architectural Record*.

Hound & Horn, in particular, offers an interesting example of the kind of layered discussion that may have influenced the young photographer, even before he became personally acquainted with its founder and director, Lincoln Kirstein, in 1929. The magazine's inaugural issue, published in the fall of 1927, addressed the industrial theme with a provocative essay on the "decline of architecture" by Henry-Russell Hitchcock (his first published contribution), followed by four photographs by Jere Abbott depicting the New England Confectionery Company (Necco) Factory in Cambridge.[35] Abbott's portfolio may have caught Evans's attention at the time of his trip to Montreal with Grotz: made in the radical style of German and Russian photography of the mid-1920s, it was one of the earliest instances of the American reception of the New Vision (figs. 563–565). As such, it was meant to signal the magazine's advanced position within the transatlantic debate on technology and architecture, only months after this theme had been showcased in the Machine-Age Exposition.

The Necco building, designed by F. C. Lutze of the engineering firm Lockwood, Greene & Co. and built in 1926, was a 500,000-square-foot, 6-story block in

35. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., "The Decline of Architecture," and Jere Abbott, "Four Photographs," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1927), pp. 27–35 and following p. 35, respectively. The article prompted a critical letter to the editors by Detroit-based architect Charles Crombie, which was followed by Hitchcock's response: see "Correspondence: The Decline of Architecture," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 1927), pp. 140–43 and Vol. 1, No. 3 (March 1928), pp. 244–45, respectively.

reinforced concrete clad in limestone and buff brick, embracing a small power plant on Massachusetts Avenue, just north of Albany Street.[36] Abbott's portfolio reduced what was hailed as the world's largest candy factory to a collection of volatile fragments: looking up from a worm's-eye perspective, the photographs seemed to incorporate the viewpoint of a casual observer disoriented by the building's repetitive façades and jagged rooflines. Presented in the most classical way despite their modernist style – with no caption to interfere with the image and a blank page facing each picture – the series in fact revealed a precise sequential order. In the first two fragments, the same corner solution was shown from different angles, with geometrical variations of volume and texture underscored by a meticulous choice of cast shadows. The following two images (stacked upon each other on a single page) showed again the same architectural element and a different corner solution, this time from a greater distance. This vantage point allowed the photographer to include minor details – such as ventilators and dust collectors protruding from the factory's roofline – whose "organic" shapes seemed to contradict the principles of rationality and simplicity governing the overall design.

In the few lines preceding the portfolio, Jere Abbott was introduced as a member of the "Department of Fine Arts," while the Necco factory was presented as "a noteworthy example of what Mr. Hitchcock calls 'The finest fragments of contemporary building'."[37] The cognoscenti could easily read these brief remarks as a reference to Kirstein's intellectual circle in Cambridge, a new cultural space delimited by such diverse outposts as Harvard Square and Central Square, the Fogg Museum and the Necco candy factory, high art and functional design. Abbott, Hitchcock, and Kirstein were all graduate students at Harvard, shaped by the "Fogg method" and by the influential

36. Albert Perkins Langtry, *Metropolitan Boston: A Modern History* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1929), Vol. II, p. 631. Frederick Clemens Lutze (1882–1973) studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and joined Lockwood Greene's Boston office in 1918: Samuel Bicknell Lincoln *Lockwood Greene: The History of an Engineering Business, 1832–1958* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1960), p. 371.

37. Abbott, "Four Photographs," p. 27.

museum course taught by art historian Paul J. Sachs, who would ask students to develop their visual acuity not only by studying original artworks and good reproductions, but also by looking at everyday objects bought in five-and-ten cents stores.[38] Another notable member of the Harvard group was Abbott's roommate Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who in the spring of 1927 had been hired by Wellesley College to teach the first American course on modern art.[39]

Contrary to what the introductory note implied, Hitchcock's essay did not directly address the Necco building, nor did it discuss Abbott's photographs. The remark quoted by the editors of *Hound & Horn* was culled from his article, a theoretical discussion of the significance of architecture in a civilization on the verge of collapse, in which the primacy of technical precision seemed to indicate a "crisis of self-consciousness of mortality" rather than a promise of rational progress.[40] Looking at the manifestations of contemporary architecture and drawing upon the philosophical thought of Henry Adams, Oswald Spengler, and Paul Valéry, the essay described the decade of the 1920s as a critical passage between "the downslope of the nineteenth century" and the "precipice before us," a historical moment dominated by the illusion of speed and by architecture's failure to provide a symbolic system consistent with the spirit of the times.[41] While Hitchcock, quite obviously, aimed his criticism at the neo-Gothic revival of Ralph Adams Cram and Giles Gilbert Scott, he also raised doubts about the industrial buildings designed by engineers and even questioned the very notion of "modernist" architecture. Central to his discussion was the issue of technical precision, which he saw

38. Sally Anne Duncan, *Paul J. Sachs and the Institutionalization of Museum Culture Between the World Wars*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Tufts University, 2001, pp. 204–5; Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), p. 71.

39. Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 57–77, 91, 147 ff.

40. Hitchcock, "The Decline of Architecture," pp. 28–35.

41. Hitchcock mentioned Spengler's concept of "world as history" (without citing the source) in "Correspondence: The Decline of Architecture," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (March 1928), p. 245.

as a pervasive menace to contemporary architecture. The term "precision" recurred in many passages of the essay to describe several related phenomena: the deceitful exactitude of imitation in the "blonde wig and gold teeth" of Revivalism; the pragmatism of "technics for technics' sake" that produced "not monuments of modern architecture but merely bad machines"; or the "conscious aesthetic additions to technical perfection" that degraded the work of Le Corbusier and Mendelsohn to the level of mere "embellishment." In the end, Hitchcock accepted technology as an inevitable element of modern civilization, but refused to equate architecture with strict functionalism. It was in this context that he spoke of the "finest fragments of contemporary building," which he identified with the "factories and laboratories where the builders sought only the perfect technical solution of their practical problems, and permitted themselves no thought consciously aesthetic."[42] Although a "surrealist" approach was sometimes necessary to purify architecture of its superstructure, he claimed, only the "consciousness of the designer" had the power to resist the vagaries of chance and the laws of economy. Architecture may be bound to disappear, but it was still the architect's task to coordinate engineering work, select among equally satisfying solutions of specific problems, and impose order and intelligence on the "complex whole."

How these ideas related to Abbott's photographs of the Necco factory was left to the reader to decipher. As illustrations of the machine age and of Hitchcock's plea for architectural guidance, they effectively rendered the qualities of precision and simplicity typical of modern engineering, while at the same time, giving the impression of an unplanned whole resulting from the mere accumulation of functional solutions. On the other hand, however, Abbott's style seemed to imply a "surrealist" strategy to which Hitchcock subscribed only in part. Apparently devoid of any "thought consciously aesthetic," they seemed to rely solely on the medium's technical unconscious and to refuse any act of "intelligent" composition. It is unclear whether the photographs were taken

42. Hitchcock, "The Decline of Architecture," p. 31.

independently or made on commission, most likely to accompany Hitchcock's essay.[43] In any case, the portfolio was not meant as either an exhaustive depiction of the site or a visual translation of the essay, but rather as an interpretive work that implied a large degree of autonomy on the part of the photographer. To an extent, Abbott's photographs even seemed to contradict Hitchcock's ideas.

From a different perspective, the *Hound & Horn* portfolio can be viewed as a direct expression of the same technical culture that produced the factory it depicted. In Hitchcock's terms, the first two photographs of the series, showing an architectural element from different perspectives, were "interchangeable solutions of details" that raised issues of selection and coherence. Taken individually, they were about precision and rationality; as a pair, they looked indecisive and redundant. Neither a catalogue of selected objects nor a full-fledged photographic essay with a clear narrative, Abbott's series questioned traditional notions of photographic "work" and authorship: What was a photographer to make of the modern city? Was he supposed to explore, like a specialized engineer, a range of equally plausible solutions to specific questions? Or should he rather aim at a coherent synthesis of the complex whole, like the architect advocated by Hitchcock?

It was this kind of questions that one can imagine occupied Evans when he began his visual exploration of New York's skyscrapers and Montreal's grain elevators, with an eye to the most recent manifestations of modern architecture but with a plan to put together a multilayered portrait of the metropolis. If Evans found inspiration and a challenge in Abbott's precedent – he would soon contribute to *Hound & Horn* with his own portfolios on urban subjects – in the end it was Hitchcock's provocative view of the 1920s that resonated in the photographs he accumulated between 1928

43. I opt for the second hypothesis on the basis of Abbott's limited investment in the medium and on the lack of further evidence regarding his photographic production. Meyer (*What Was Contemporary Art?*, p. 88) claims that the Necco photographs were made upon request of Alfred H. Barr, but fails to provide evidence.

and 1934. The skepticism toward a purely "precisionist" aesthetic expressed in "The Decline of Architecture" is consistent with Evans's photographic style and with the disdain for the "Chrysler period" that he cared to expound in his early writings.[44] But it was Hitchcock's idea of a civilization dying under the veneer of technological progress that mostly resonates with Evans's "destructive character," to borrow a quote from Walter Benjamin.[45] The irony and the paradox of the city's self-annihilation that he saw in the modern skyscraper found a theoretical explanation in Hitchcock's essay. By 1931, when the consequences of the economic crisis were becoming visible and the decline of modern architecture was a fact, Evans was reading Evelyn Waugh's "excellent, splendid" *Decline and Fall* and praising Spengler as "the guy to investigate from our point of view."[46] Shortly afterward, Malcolm Cowley in *Exile's Return* fancied about the destruction of Manhattan.[47] Negative thinking was widespread among younger intellectuals of the time: even Lewis Mumford, writing to Frank Lloyd Wright in 1928, had judged Hitchcock's essay "an expression of impotence," observing that his analysis of the end of art and architecture was the paradoxical product of an artist alienated from society, like most men of the post-war generation; he conceded, however, that "unlike the academic impotents, they acknowledge their emptiness honestly."[48] Mumford probably had similar feelings about Evans, and it is perhaps because of such misalliance that in 1931 he dropped Lincoln Kirstein's proposal to include some of Evans's photographs in the forthcoming edition of *The Brown Decades*.[49]

44. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 127.

45. Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," p. 127.

46. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, July 4, 1931, quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 143–44.

47. Cowley, *Exile's Return,* p. 212.

48. Letter, Lewis Mumford to Frank Lloyd Wright, July 10, 1928, in *Frank Lloyd Wright & Lewis Mumford: Thirty Years of Correspondence*, edited by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and Robert Wojtowicz (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), pp. 55–56.

49. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 142–43; Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 68.

A new chapter in the reception of Abbott's portfolio occurred in 1928, when a second article on the Necco Factory was published in *The Arts* by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.[50] It is worth analyzing this passage, because it illuminates important aspects of the diffusion of urban images that Evans was beginning to face with his own work. As part of his Wellesley class on modern art and following the example of his Harvard mentor, Paul J. Sachs, Barr instructed students to become familiar with all aspects of contemporary design, like H. H. Richardson's railway stations and industrial buildings such as the Motor Mart Garage and the Necco Factory.[51] Given these premises, the discussion that Barr proposed in *The Arts* was much more specific than Hitchcock's philosophical essay, and his use of the Abbott portfolio followed accordingly.

The framework of the article was established at the outset with three correlated quotations. The first, from Ernest Renan, established architecture's role as the key factor for the understanding of civilization: "Architecture is the criterion of the integrity, the judgment, and the seriousness of a nation." Originally published in 1873 in an article on Phoenician art, the sentence was reprinted from the catalogue of the Machine-Age Exposition, where it was first translated as a counterpoint to Hugh Ferriss's introductory essay.[52] The second was the concluding remark of William Richard Lethaby's *Architecture*, first published in 1911, in which the design professor of the South Kensington School defended the role of science against the dangers of vulgarity, defined as "a pretence to beauty at second hand."[53] Finally, Barr introduced the reader

50. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "The Necco Factory," *The Arts*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (May 1928), pp. 292–95.

51. [Mary C. Bostwick,] "Wellesley and Modernism," *Boston Evening Transcript* (April 27, 1927), p. 10, quoted in Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr*, pp. 102–3 and Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, pp. 44 and *passim*.

52. "L'architecture est le criterium le plus sûr de l'honnêteté, du jugement, du sérieux d'une nation": Ernest Renan, "L'art phénicien," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts,* Tome VII, 2e période, 191e livraison (May 1, 1873), pp. 377–93 (quotation p. 382), trans. *Machine-Age Exposition*, p. 7.

53. William Richard Lethaby, *Architecture: An Introduction to the History and Theory of the Art of Building* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), p. 251.

to the recent transatlantic debate on architectural modernism with the now-famous "reminder" published by Le Corbusier and Amedée Ozenfant in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and republished in *Vers une architecture*: "N.B. – Let us listen to the counsels of American engineers. But let us beware of American architects."[54]

Interestingly, none of the pundits Barr chose to evoke was American: the critical issues raised by the Necco Factory, he seemed to imply, were but a chapter in the larger history of architecture, and specifically in the age-old dilemma between "utilitarian purpose" and "decoration" (as Lethaby wrote with respect to Egyptian architecture), or *utilitas* and *venustas* (according to the theory of Vitruvius, to which Barr made extensive reference).[55] One third of the article was devoted to a discussion of this duality, moving from Greek and Roman architecture to contemporary New York: praising the Fred F. French Building as an example of successful skyscraper architecture, Barr he derided the "Gothic stubble" of the Woolworth Building and the "Baroque cosmetics" of the Ritz Tower. Behind this historical framework, however, stood the precedent of Hitchcock's groundbreaking essay. His influence is evident in Barr's distinction between "consciously architectural effects and the unconscious, or at least involuntary effects of structural or utilitarian requirement," and in his classification of contemporary American architecture according to building typologies — ecclesiastical, academic, civic, commercial, and industrial — which he saw as "a graded series through which we pass from architect to engineer and from derivative eclectic architecture to creative architecture."[56]

54. Interestingly, Barr gave the original quotation in French: "N.B. — Écoutons les conseils des ingénieurs américains. Mais craignons les architectes américains.": Le Corbusier-Saugnier [Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant], "Trois rappels à MM. les architectes. 2ème article," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, No. 2 (November 1920), p. 199, trans. in Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 42.

55. Lethaby, *Architecture*, p. 16.

56. In "The Decline of Architecture," Hitchcock spoke of "the inversion of the traditional hierarchy by which the average factory becomes more aesthetically significant than the average church and the average bathroom more beautiful than its accompanying boudoir" (p. 30).

Given these premises, Barr spoke appreciatively of F. C. Lutze, the engineer of the Necco building, and of most of his design decisions: the organization of the C-shape plan *vis-à-vis* the irregularity of the plot, the manipulation of building blocks and façade decoration according to utilitarian principles, the interesting variations in the use of fenestration, and the absence of parapets or false fronts generally employed to conceal the most picturesque elements, such as roof tanks and dust collectors. Overall, Barr limited his mild criticism to the "rather paltry colonnette mullions" of the main tower facing Massachusetts Avenue. Certainly referring to the Machine-Age Exposition, he made a scornful nod to present-day "machine idolaters" mentioning only in passing "the amazing complex of dynamos, boilers, automatic sprinklers, miles of process pipes, filters, refrigerators, pulverizers, de-humidifiers, and pumps" housed behind the factory façades.

The distinguishing element of his discussion was rather his grasp of the urban context. Looking at Cambridge through the lens of Ernest Renan, he preceded by several decades the diagnosis of late 20th-century observers who have spoken of the "disorderly eclecticism of Massachusetts Avenue."[57] At the same time, he suggested that buildings like the Necco Factory, precisely because of their elemental beauty, could function as new landmarks for the modern city:

> The architectural experiences of Massachusetts Avenue, from Symphony Hall in Boston to Harvard Square in Cambridge, express American civilization at its funniest if not at its worst. The sad gray halls of Technology and the monstrous rear of the Widener library bracket between them miles of cheap apartment houses, little shops perpetually in a state of fire-sale, turreted Victorian warehouses, a fine "Mansard" house of the

57. Naomi Miller, Keith N. Morgan, *Boston Architecture, 1975–1990* (Munich: Prestel, 1990), p. 201.

eighties, and two or three quite presentable garages. Amid this rabble, strange in its austerity, towers the Necco factory.[58]

Probably because Abbott's photographs conveyed more of the building's strangeness than its "austerity," and because their style was too advanced for the readers of *The Arts,* the article opened with a general view of the complex by F. L. Fales (fig. 566).[59] Taken from an elevated vantage point using a wide-angle lens, according to the most orthodox rules of architectural photography, it showed the back of the building with its two wings enveloping the lower plant in the middle, dominated by the towering smokestack carrying the company's name in cubic letters. By including trees, parked cars, a Jenney gas station, and two figures standing placidly on the curb, the photographer managed to suggest the urban character of the factory, while at the same time providing a clear description of the building's size, scale, and distribution.

Abbott's photographs, reproduced in the following pages, read as specifications of Fales's panoptic view, thus losing much of the interpretive power they had in the *Hound & Horn* portfolio. Furthermore, one of the pictures was cropped to better fit the magazine's layout; and Barr, or the *Arts* editors, replaced one of the variant photographs illustrating Hitchcock's essay with a worm's-eye view of the factory smokestack, also by Abbott. The series was thus reconfigured to trace a logical movement from the façade of the main tower on Massachusetts Avenue to the base of the smokestack in the inner court, where the observer was left looking up at the same Necco sign that commanded Fales's opening view. Perhaps overstating the case, Barr observed: "The whole composition is greatly enhanced by the chimney somewhat as an Italian basilica and its campanile are mutually complimentary [sic]." Incognizant of Abbott's homage to Albert

58. Barr, "The Necco Factory," p. 293.

59. Fred L. Fales was a commecial photographer based in Waltham, Mass. For early examples of his published work, see Charles A. Coolidge, "The Dormitory Buildings," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (October 14, 1914) pp. 37–40.

Renger-Patzsch and to his vertiginous photograph of a smokestack that Moholy-Nagy, in *Malerei Fotografie Film,* equated to "the power of animal forms," the architectural historian saw the factory chimney less as a contested icon of 19th-century industrialism than as a timeless archetype.[60] In the Necco Factory, ecclesiastical and industrial architecture – the two building types at the opposite ends of Barr's scale – were finally reconciled. In fact, the disarmament of the New Vision began with its first introduction in the United States.[61]

Although a marginal case in the history of architectural photography, Abbott's series on the Necco Factory sheds an interesting light on the manipulations to which the iconography of the machine age was subjected in Kirstein's intellectual circle shortly before Evans's appearance on the scene. In *Hound & Horn* as in *The Arts,* Abbott's mobile gaze conveyed the same dynamism of contemporary life that European artists were exploring in Berlin, Moscow, and Paris. Yet Hitchcock and Barr, despite their knowledge of Russian and German art, took a different perspective on industrial buildings, privileging a transhistorical reading that harked back to the origins of architecture and looked ahead to the end of civilization. Like Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus, they seemed reluctant to accept the style of the New Vision as the proper language to illustrate and explain the inherent values of what they considered to be modern architecture.[62] Their

60. Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Fotografie Film*, p. 57. Incidentally, this type of photographs was mostly absent from the Machine-Age Exposition, which Lozowick helped organize and Barr implicitly acknowledged in his essay. With the except of the work of Ralph Steiner, the exhibition catalogue and apparently the exhibition itself were entirely illustrated with architectural photographs made according to the professional standards of the time.

61. On the American domestication of European avant-garde photography, see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," *Afterimage,* Vol. 10, No. 6 (January 1983), pp. 9–14, reprinted in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 52–84.

62. On Gropius's refusal to illustrate his own work with photographs in the style of the New Vision, see Hélène Jannière, *Politiques éditoriales et architecture moderne: L'émergence de nouvelles revues en France et en Italie, 1923–1939* (Paris: Éditions Arguments, 2002).

mild reaction to the innovations of European photography and their preference for more traditional types of representation was to play a decisive role in Cambridge's (and later New York's) art circles.

In September 1928, Hitchcock reprised his transhistorical explanation in a second article for *Hound & Horn,* this time devoted to "Four Harvard Architects" and specifically to the work of the late Peter van der Meulen Smith. Despite Smith's awareness and respect for the past, he wrote, "the lessons he would learn from history are of a theoretical and philosophical order."[63] The moderns' connection with history, Hitchcock implied, was not intended in terms of style and revival, but as a "natural historical method of a renewment of structure." Once again, he observed that in America this new approach emerged "unconsciously in the work of engineers in such buildings as factories and garages," as well as in the work of foreign architects like Neutra and Lescaze. It was on that occasion that he first advanced the idea of a design process that "is very definitely not a French, nor a Dutch, nor a German, nor a Russian, but an international style." Consistently, the visual documentation that Hitchcock included in this article and that he promoted in his subsequent works – including *Modern Architecture* (1929) and *International Style* (1932) – steered away from any recognizable national language and favored more neutral forms of visual description.[64] Hitchcock's collaboration with Berenice Abbott for a survey of antebellum vernacular architecture exhibited at

63. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., "Four Harvard Architects," *Hound & Horn,* Vol. 2, No. 1 (September 1928), pp. 41–47. Smith was Harvard graduate who had moved to Europe, where he worked with Lurçat and Le Corbusier before he died prematurely at the age of 26.

64. In the catalogue of *Modern Architecture* exhibition that Barr organized with Philip Johnson at the MoMA in 1932, the only concession to a recognizable European style was a photograph of Howe & Lescaze's Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Building taken by Ralph Steiner (in 1932, Steiner was married to Mary Hughes, who later became Lescaze's wife). See George Howe, "Functional Aesthetics and the Social Ideal," *Pencil Points*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (April 1932), pp. 215–18 and "Planning, Engineering, Equipment: The Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building", *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 57 (December 1932), pp. 482–98, 543–46. See also "Philadelphia's Modernist Building," *Fortune*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (December 1932), pp. 65-69.

Wesleyan in 1934 and his endorsement of her project on "Changing New York" can be considered a consequence of this general approach.[65]

Barr's understanding of modern photography evolved along similar lines. Initially interested in medieval art, he began to develop a serious interest in contemporary culture during a European trip in 1924–1925, when he collected materials for a dissertation on "The Machine in Modern Art." His education in the field of modern architecture was strongly influenced by the books of Le Corbusier, but he soon developed a keen interest in Constructivist and Suprematist art through a series of lectures by Louis Lozowick, published under the title *Modern Russian Art*, which he had read twice by February 1927.[66] In the winter of 1927–1928, Barr travelled again to Europe, this time with Jere Abbott, meeting all the major artists of the time.[67] Some, like Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko, by that time had turned their efforts to non-traditional arts like photography, and it is telling that in his diary Barr expressed a certain disappointment for their rejection of easel painting. The trip, however, was crucial for his subsequent career as the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (with Abbott as his associate director), where he was pivotal in the introduction of modern European art to the United States and in the establishment of a photography department in 1940. Yet Barr was mildly interested not only in the type of experiments that Abbott had made at the Necco Factory, but also in the medium as such. In fact, as Sybil Gordon Kantor has observed, "Barr revealed his hesitation in wholeheartedly accepting photography as an art."[68] Of the fifty entries that he wrote in 1927 for a "Modern Art Questionnaire"

65. Janine A. Mileaf, Carla Yanni, *Constructing Modernism: Berenice Abbott and Henry-Russell Hitchcock* (Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, 1993).

66. Louis Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art* (New York: Société Anonyme, 1925): see pp. 100–1, 248.

67. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Notes on Russian Architecture," *The Arts*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1929), pp. 103–6 and "Russian Diary 1927–28," *October*, No. 7 (Winter 1978), pp. 10–51; Jere Abbott, "Notes from a Soviet Diary," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (April–June 1929), pp. 257–66 and "Notes from a Soviet Diary II," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (July–September 1929). pp. 388–96.

68. Kantor, *Alfred H Barr, Jr.*, p. 204.

published in *Vanity Fair*, only one was devoted to a photographer (his friend Alfred Stieglitz), although he ironically apologized for having included "no spellbinders, such as: Name four important artist-photographers whose names begin with St—."[69]

Perhaps unconsciously, by capping Abbott's series of the Necco Factory with the Fales view (or allowing the magazine editors to do so), Barr reflected the same general ambivalence toward European photography that in 1932 led Katharine Grant Sterne to deliver her dictum: "The Russo-German cult of *sachlichkeit* is essentially an American invention."[70] What happened in the meanwhile was much the undertaking of Lincoln Kirstein, both as the co-founder of *Hound & Horn* and as one of the junior advisors of the Museum of Modern Art. While the Spenglerian philosophy of history informed Hitchcock's discussion of "high" architecture, Kirstein moved in measured steps toward the rediscovery of American popular culture. Over the years the magazine published several photographs that supported this viewpoint: Sheeler's views of the Ford Plant complementing Jere Abbott's Necco Factory; explorations of the ordinary landscape by Berenice Abbott, Ralph Steiner, and Evans himself; Surrealist fragments by Harry Crosby; and even sports snapshots illustrating the game plans of the Harvard football team in action.[71]

In 1930, Kirstein mounted the first "International Photography" exhibition at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, which included ten of Evans's photographs of New York City, side by side with works by Stieglitz, Strand, Sheeler, Man Ray, Berenice

69. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "A Modern Art Questionnaire," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (August 1927), pp. 85, 96, 98 (quotation p. 96). According to Maria Morris Hambourg ("From 291 to the Museum of Modern Art," p. 41), the four "artist-photographers" were Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, and Ralph Steiner.

70. Katharine Grant Sterne, "American vs. European Photography," *Parnassus*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1932), pp. 16–20.

71. Franklin P. Jones, "Three Football Photographs," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 1927), following p. 133. Jones was a student at Harvard College when he took the photographs; he graduated from Harvard Law School in 1933.

Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, and Ralph Steiner, among others. Despite its title (possibly evoking Hitchcock's concept of "international style" in architecture), the only foreign photographers included were Eugène Atget, George Hoyningen-Huene, Tina Modotti, and László Moholy-Nagy.[72] The imbalance was symptomatic of the relative scarcity of original European prints in the years that preceded the advent of art merchants specializing in modern photography, such as John Becker and Julien Levy. It also mirrored Kirstein's perspective as a promoter of an American version of modern photography based on the reevaluation of "simple clarity in documentary form," as he wrote with reference to the work of Atget. It was mostly through the photographic culture of France, rather than Germany or Russia, that Kirstein crafted his program for a new American photography. At this point in his career, his understanding of the medium was influenced by the ideas of Pierre Mac Orlan, possibly absorbed through the text on Sheeler that Eugène Jolas had published in *transition*. Kirstein's appreciation of Stieglitz for his "plastic [...] strength and analytical nuance" resonated with Jolas's notion of "plastic objectivity." Similarly, Sheeler's "dynamic magic" and "revelation of the fantastic" were translated by Kirstein with the idea of photography's "contemporary consciousness of time, surprising the passing moment out of its context in flux, and holding it up to be regarded in the magic of its arrest."[73]

Only in later years would Kirstein begin to champion a truly American photographer like Matthew Brady as a documentarian of the commonplace and a role model for the present generation of younger artists. In 1933, Brady's photographs of the Civil War were the subject of a lengthy article in *Hound & Horn*, in which Charles Flato encouraged contemporary photographers to look again at the work of this "man of the active

72. According to the exhibition brochure, works by Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, Edward Steichen, and George Hoyningen-Huene were shown in reproduction: Lincoln Kirstein, "Introductory Note," in *International Photography*, Exhibition booklet, Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, November 7–29, 1930 (WEA 1994.250.87 [4]).

73. Quotations are from Kirstein's "Introductory Note" and Jolas, "Charles Sheeler: The Industrial Mythos," p. 123.

athletic world," as opposed to a "subjective conscious artist."[74] In 1934, Kirstein himself consecrated Brady as the harbinger of a new American art of the "modern times":

> Although primarily of historic interest, Brady's plates have the esthetic overtone of naked, almost airless, factual truth, the distinction of suspended actuality, of objective immediacy not possible, even desirable, in paint.[75]

It is telling that the essay opened with a view of maimed soldiers in the Armory Square Hospital by Brady and ended with Evans's unemployed man in *South Street*, 1932, reproduced full page.[76] In between these two icons of a nation in crisis, a double-page spread addressed issues of style by opposing the soft-focus Pictorialism of Alice Boughton and the textural precision of Edward Weston; in a second spread, the medium's "objective clarity" was shown at work in Edward Steichen's *George Washington Bridge*, 1931, Ralph Steiner's *American Rural Baroque*, c. 1929 (fig. 675), and a Sheeler view of the Ford Factory: a tableau in which industrial and provincial America were brought to unity by the photographers' ability to grasp the essential textures and patterns

74. Charles Flato, "Matthew B. Brady, 1823–1896," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (October-December 1933), pp. 35–41 (quotation p. 40).

75. Lincoln Kirstein, "Photography in the United States," in *Art in America in Modern Times*, edited by Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934), pp. 85–90 (quotation p. 86). The essay was originally prepared for a radio broadcast, "Photography in the United States: from the Daguerreotype to the Photo Mural," that aired on January 12, 1935, the fifteenth in a series of programs organized by the Museum of Modern Art in cooperation with the American Federation of Arts: see Museum of Modern art, press releases for September 22, 1934 and January 6, 1935, MoMA Archives, New York.

76. This photograph was a cropped version of a print now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (33.65.307), no longer attributed to Brady. See also National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., Mathew Brady Photographs of Civil War-Era Personalities and Scenes, Record Group 111: Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 1860–1985 (B-358).

of the everyday.[77] Like Hitchcock and Barr in the field of architecture, Kirstein sought historical and cultural continuity in American photography; speaking of the "art photographs" of Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and Ralph Steiner, he praised their

> scenes of human interest caught in the passage of time and events, scenes which by their tragic or comic typicality summon up a whole world of related reference – a locomotive, the prow of an ocean liner, crowds in city streets, ferry boats, or architectural curiosities as keys to an epoch […].[78]

Kirstein's choice of examples was far from innocent: while the average reader could simply gloss over such generic evocation of urban stereotypes, his list of subjects carried a coded meaning for the knowing photographer, who could easily translate it into a photographic gallery featuring Stieglitz's *The Hand of Man*, 1902 and *After Working Hours – The Ferry Boat*, 1910, alongside Evans's *S.S. Leviathan*, 1930 (fig. 27) and perhaps Berenice Abbott's *Sailors' Bethel*, 1932 (fig. 276). These "keys to an epoch" depicted industrial America not through the eyes of the New Vision, but in the vein of Lewis Mumford, who in *The Brown Decades* (1931) devoted a laudatory chapter to Alfred Stieglitz and praised his respect for "the shapes of ferryboats and trains in railroad yards and airplanes," his "objectivity by inclusion" (as opposed to an "objectivity by restriction"), and finally his quest for a type of "Sachlichkeit that Roebling was the first to express firmly in the Brooklyn Bridge."[79]

To what degree Evans owed or contributed his ideas to Kirstein and *Hound & Horn* is difficult to determine. In 1929 or 1930, following his initial collaboration with Paul

77. A different reading of Steiner's *American Rural Baroque* was offered in "Vanishing Backyards," *Fortune*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (May 1930), pp. 77–81, in which the photographer's work was reproduced side by side with paintings of small-town America in decay by Charles Burchfield.

78. Kirstein, "Photography in the United States," p. 87

79. Mumford, *The Brown Decades*, p. 235.

Grotz, the encounter with the younger Kirstein (and by extension with the teaching of Paul Sachs) gave him a new awareness and probably new direction to his work.[80] Already familiar with European books like Mendelsohn's *Amerika* and Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture,* he had an opportunity to expand his architectural education through the essays, reviews, and letters to the editors that Kirstein selected for *Hound & Horn*, including the 1931 article by George Lyman Paine, Jr. for which Evans contributed two illustrations. At least one passage in Evans's article on "The Reappearance of Photography," published in the same year, suggests a deeper connection with the ideas promoted by the magazine. By proposing to read the work of Atget as "an open window looking straight down a stack of decades," rather than "a quaint evocation of the past," he echoed the same criticism that Hitchcock and Barr were bringing against imitation and Revivalism in architecture, in support of a critical understanding of history as a process of growth and decay.[81] Evans began to absorb aspects of Kirstein's program while he was working on the New York project, moving progressively toward a more literal interpretation of the vernacular, both in terms of style and subject matter. In 1930, he and Kirstein, with poet and architectural critic Jack Wheelwright, devised a project to document Victorian architecture in the Eastern states, which in 1933 materialized in a small exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1937, Evans spent some time in Washington, D.C. with plans to make reproductions from Brady's original photographs of the Civil War in view of an exhibition of his work.[82]

80. "Oddly enough, what happened was that this undergraduate was *teaching* me something about what I was doing": Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 83.

81. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 126.

82. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, pp. 336, 339.

Evans's interpretation of the machine age responded to these cultural shifts. Images like *S.S. Leviathan,* to which Kirstein probably referred in his article of 1934, demonstrate this passage. During this period Evans, however, recorded several aspects of maritime life in New York: ocean liners, like the S.S. Juan Sebastián Elcano, Mexico, President Roosevelt, and Rex (figs. 31–37); tugboats and barges (figs. 62, 623); ship masts, rigging, piers, dock piling (fig. 38–43). Some of these subjects, like the power plants and the smokestacks of the industrial landscape, figured prominently in the transatlantic debate on the machine age. Ocean liners, for example, occupied a substantial part in a chapter of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* entitled "Eyes which do not see."[83] For Le Corbusier, the modern steamship was the prototype of the living machine, the essence of architecture understood as the materialization "of temerity, of discipline, of harmony, of a beauty that is calm, vital and strong"; or, in the vocabulary of the Esprit Nouveau, a "correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light."[84] In 1926, a photograph of the S.S. Leviathan approaching the Hudson River against the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline was reproduced in *L'Art Vivant* on the same page with a mechanistic painting by Gerald Murphy, *Watch*, 1924–1925.[85] Similar discussions could be found in German publications of the 1920s: in 1929, the Werkbund magazine *Die Form* published an article on the ocean liner Bremen, followed by an essay by Franz Kollmann (illustrated with photographs by architect Fritz Block) discussing the issue of form in modern ships with reference to Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) (fig. 33).[86]

83. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, pp. 85–103.

84. Ibid., pp. 101, 102–3.

85. Jacques Mauny, "New York – 1926," *L'Art Vivant,* Vol. 2, No. 26 (January 15, 1926), pp. 53–58. The painting is now in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art.

86. Walter Riezler, "Die Bremen" and Franz Kollmann, "Versuche zur technischen Formanalyse," *Die Form*, Vol. 4, No. 23 (December 1, 1929), pp. 619–25 and 625–30, respectively. Kollmann was the author of the photographic book *Schönheit der Technik* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1928).

American publications quickly followed: starting in the late 1920s, steamships were featured in several articles of *World's Work*, including a double-page spread that gave ample space to Evans's *S.S. Leviathan*.[87] In the following years, a perceptive critic of the city like Lewis Mumford urged the readers of *Technics and Civilization* to "observe the derricks, the ropes, the stanchions and ladders of a modern steamship, close at hand in the night, when the hard shadows mingle obliquely with the hard white shapes."[88] In the interaction of modern engineering with the vagaries of light and the accidents of material culture he seeemed to find a potential for the expansion of aesthetic experience – a lesson drawn from the artistic precedents of Charles Demuth's *Paquebot "Paris",* 1921–1922 and Charles Sheeler's *Upper Deck*, 1929 (based on a photograph of the S.S. Majestic taken the previous year) (figs. 35, 36). Yet Mumford's assessment of the ocean liner was less optimistic than most of his contemporaries: counting the S.S. Leviathan among the "paleotechnic triumphs" of the century, he bluntly criticized its giantism and underscored the social contradictions embedded in a floating city designed according to hierarchies of class.[89]

Writing in 1934, Mumford was certainly aware of *The American Leviathan,* a bulky treatise by Charles and William Beard published in 1930 that revamped Hobbes's figure to analyze the challenges facing national government in "the republic in the Machine

87. Charles Johnson Post, "Unsinkable Ships," *World's Work*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (April 1929), pp. 82–86; "The Ship Comes In," *World's Work*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (June 1931), pp. 68–69 (with one, or possibly two, illustrations by Evans).

88. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1934), p. 333.

89. Ibid., following p. 244. Mumford notwithstanding, the celebratory iconography of the Leviathan thrived well into the decade, when the vessel, now discontinued and moored at Hoboken, was photographed in all the "splendor that was": see "The Leviathan: A Portfolio by Margaret Bourke-White," *Fortune*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 1937), pp. 68–73. In the same issue, largely devoted to maritime issues, Evans published a group of photographs, possibly taken during his trip to Cuba in 1933, illustrating a reportage on the leisurely life aboard a cruise ship to Havana: "Six Days at Sea", ibid,, pp. 117–20, 210 ff.

Age."[90] In fact, the book did not elaborate on the symbol, nor did it discuss in depth the consequences of the technological turn that captivated so many visual artists of the time. It was rather Mumford himself, writing on the arts in a collection of essays (also edited by Beard) in 1928, who had evoked the biblical image as a metaphor for the urban-technological utopia: "The mechanical Leviathan, which cities like New York and Chicago now approximate and aspire toward, is a dead form."[91] In the regional city of the future, he argued, technics and art should be integrated to provide a humanized, democratic environment.

It is thus tempting to read Evans's *S.S. Leviathan* as a visual response to a set of visual and literary precedents that he may or may not have consciously considered, but that nonetheless dominated the international debate around him at the close of the 1920s. The photograph had a direct visual precedent in *Ship Abstract, New York* by Paul Strand, published in *Broom* in 1922 as part of a portfolio accompanying his seminal essay, "Photography and the New God" (fig. 26).[92] But in all its straightforwardness, Evans's version of the Leviathan was also conversant with that larger area of contem-

90. Charles A. Beard, William Beard, *The American Leviathan: The Republic in the Machine Age* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).

91. Lewis Mumford, "The Arts," in *Whither Mankind: A Panorama of Modern Civilization*, edited by Charles A. Beard (New York: Longman, Green & Co., 1928), pp. 287–312 (quotation pp. 309–10). Significantly, a woodcut illustration at the opening of the essay depicted the prow of a steamship very similar to the S.S. Leviathan. Mumford's familiarity with Melville's *Moby Dick* accounts for his familiarity with this trope.

92. Paul Strand, "Photography and the New God," *Broom*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (November 1922), pp. 252–58. (following p. 272). In the magazine the photographs were uncaptioned; *Ship Abstract, New York*, 1922 is the title given by Strand for a set of master prints now in the collection of the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson (76:011:026). Evans could hardly have missed that particular issue, which also included contributions by Aragon, Dostoevsky, and a pathbreaking essay by Matthew Josephson on "The Great American Billposter." In his article, Strand submitted that in its present stage of advancement, epitomized by the work of Stieglitz, photography could act as a fruitful mediation between conceptual knowledge and aesthetic intuition, in view of a humanization of the new "trinity" constituted by machines, empirical materialism, and science.

porary thought at the crossroads of art and architecture that opposed the conservative values of Victorian culture and its anachronistic clinging to the European tradition, supporting instead the quest for an American modernism based on simplicity and pragmatism. Evans occasionally used captions to suggest possible readings of his work, and photographs like *S.S. Leviathan*, as *Wall Street Windows* discussed above, seem intended to disclose a whole range of connections behind, or beyond, their immediate documentary function. To claim that Evans was always in full control of the implications of his work would be too far-fetched; yet Kirstein's invitation to look at his sketchy snapshots as "keys to an epoch" should not be underestimated. As the photographer often repeated in his later years, he conceived of artists as "transmitters of sensitivities that they're not aware of having, of forces that are in the air at that time." Accordingly, he saw Atget as the personification of French (or Parisian) culture, "a kind of medium" whose "work sang like lightning through him." While Evans had a clear notion of himself as an independent observer and a catalyzer of external forces, his notion of the modern photographer acknowledged the challenge of a medium that required a certain degree of unconsciousness, as well as "faith, intelligence and cultivation."[93]

What complicated his ambitious project on late-1920s New York was the fact that the same paradox was ingrained in his subject matter: to photograph the modern city meant to address both its surface and its subtexts, the unplanned aesthetics of the urbanscape and the cultural debate surrounding it. The degree of this awareness is suggested by a remark he made in 1931 about the potential of the camera "*reflecting* swift chance, disarray, wonder, and experiment."[94] Perhaps the most fitting example of the multilayered and transatlantic character of Evans's work is *Port of New York*, 1928–1929 (fig. 41). Contrary to modernist photographs and paintings of the time that incorporated the subject matter and the style of the machine age, this image seemed to record

93. Evans, "The Thing Itself," p. 15; Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 88.
94. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 126 (italics added).

a picturesque bit of harbor life, rendered through a pleasing composition of diagonal lines emanating from the spherical shape of an iron bollard. Again, we can find close precedents in works and publications with which Evans was familiar: a similar bollard was featured in the opening scenes of Ralph Steiner's film *H_2O*; and in March 1930 the film magazine *Close Up* carried a frame from the documentary film *Images d'Ostende* – a winter portrait of the Belgian maritime landscape by Henri Storck – that was strikingly similar to Evans's detail (fig. 42).[95] A subtler understanding of the implicit tensions of *Port of New York* can be gained by looking at the Fall 1930 issue of *Hound & Horn*, where Evans's photograph was published as part of a four-image portfolio entitled "New York City."[96] Placed after the clotheslines of *Wash Day,* with its shirts billowing in the wind like inflated mannequins (fig. 168), and before *Traffic*, showing a series of traffic separators and the gesture of a man raising his hat (fig. 567), Evans's rope and bollard suggested a transfiguration of the human body similar to Surrealist artworks of the time and to some of his other photographs (fig. 589). This interplay of organic forms and constricting ropes, with all its symbolic undertones, was a characteristic of Surrealist works, such as Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920. Yet *Port of New York* could also be seen as a synecdoche for the entire city: always aiming at the significant detail, the photographer left it to the viewer's imagination to conjure up all the hubbub of the modern metropolis that was part of everyday life. It was such reductionist strategy that made the modernist character of this urban fragment, as opposed to the romantic narrative of photographs like Stieglitz's *The Ferry Boat*, 1910 or Steiner's *Tug and New York Skyline*, 1922 (fig. 5).

95. Harry Alan Potamkin, "Movie: New York Notes," *Close Up*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1930), pp. 214–23 (Storck's frame following p. 214). In the preceding issue, significant space was given to the photographic and cinematographic work of Evans's friend, Ralph Steiner: *Close Up*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (February 1930), pp. 165–67 (frames from the film, together with a photograph by Steiner, *One Talking Picture*, 1929, were reproduced following p. 98).

96. Walker Evans, "New York City," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October-December 1930), following p. 42.

Again, the implicit literary associations of *Port of New York* could hardly be missed by late-1920s readers with even a basic knowledge of American cultural life. Evans's title was borrowed verbatim from a book published in 1924 by Paul Rosenfeld – the "official" art critic of the Stieglitz circle – comprising a series of fourteen essays devoted to major intellectuals who had contributed to the growth of American culture in the new century.[97] With the exception of Albert Pinkham Ryder, all the protagonists of Rosenfeld's pantheon had been active and influential in the previous two decades: older painters like Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Arthur Dove; younger artists like Kenneth Hayes Miller and Georgia O'Keeffe; writers, like Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and William Carlos Williams; cultural critics Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne; an educator, Margaret Naumburg; and a musician, Roger H. Sessions. The catalyzer and pivot of this group was Alfred Stieglitz, to whom Rosenfeld dedicated the concluding chapter. During two years before the book was published, the photographer had provided direction and support to Rosenfeld, corresponding with him and editing drafts of the essays.[98] Although some of the chapters had already been published in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *The Dial*, Stieglitz believed that a new book that could offer a compendium and a demostration of the American values he had long advocated through his galleries. As he wrote to Rosenfeld,

> Of course the world must be considered as a whole in the final analysis. That's really a platitude – so self-understood. But there is America. – Or

97. Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & Co., 1924). The book's original edition included photographic portraits by Alice Boughton, Dana Desboro, Alfred Stieglitz, and Paul Strand.

98. Marcia Brennan, "Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Rosenfeld: An Aesthetics of Intimacy," *History of Photography*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 73–81.

> isn't there an America. Are we only a marked down bargain day remnant of Europe? Haven't we any of our own courage in matters "aesthetic"?[99]

Wanda Corn has written in depth about the implications of Rosenfeld's *Port of New York* for our understanding of "the polemics of cultural nationalism, the issues of identity formation, and the centrality of transatlantic exchange" in the interwar period.[100] As the book's epilogue made clear, Rosenfeld saw New York's harbor as a symbol and a magnifier of the country's ambivalent exposure to Europe. For a long time, he argued, Manhattan had been the outpost of "a continent [that] lay submerged in chaotic pre-creation darkness" and that found its spiritual nourishment across the Atlantic, where "foreign things were more life-giving, more feeding and familiar to one for all their strangeness, than the corner of New York rounded regularly each morning and evening." Although "one could not break with New York," the city failed to provide a sense of place and community: "For in the city, things were definitely outside you, apart from you."[101] The lives of the fourteen intellectuals recounted in the book suggested that new seeds were finally taking root in the American soil, no longer stunted by the infertile ground of materialism. Although Rosenfeld admitted that the signs of a new age were still hard to decipher, in the book's epilogue he offered the consoling image of a pastoral city reconciled with its geography and a promise of spiritual fulfillment: "Out of the purpling evening above office piles there comes a breeze [...] and the clay giants of the lower city fuse into a bluish mass. Then it is almost beauty that comes to dress the slipshod harbor of New York."[102]

99. Letter, Alfred Stieglitz to Paul Rosenfeld, September 5, 1923, quoted in Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 91.

100. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, pp. 4–9 (quotation p. 5).

101. Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, pp. 285–87.

102. Ibid., pp. 291–92.

The relation between *Port of New York*, the photograph, and *Port of New York*, the book, remains open to speculation. Several factors seem to indicate distance rather than admiration on Evans's part. Undoubtedbly, the dryness of his broken poems was incompatible with Rosenfeld's elocution, and he probably agreed with Gorham Munson (the co-founder of the little magazine, *Secession*) when he publicly attacked the critic's "huge mud-bed of undisciplined emotionalism, his inflated windbag of premature ejaculations."[103] Even the atmospheric image of New York that closed the book – reminiscent of the post-Pictorialist aesthetic shared by such diverse draftsmen as Joseph Pennell and Hugh Ferriss – was at odds with the uncompromising style that Evans adopted in 1928. And although traces of Evans's admiration for certain aspects of Stieglitz's work can be found in his early correspondence, his brief, disappointing encounter with the old master in 1929 (only relieved by a casual conversation with Georgia O'Keeffe) was the beginning of a lifelong animosity toward his "humorless post-Victorian bohemianism."[104] If Stieglitz, as Evans often repeated, soon became a negative model for a generation of younger photographers drenched in the contradictions of modern America, it was also because of acolytes like Rosenfeld, who lionized the protean maker of "photographs thrustful like beaten steel and photographs tenderer than softest flower-petals, photographs sonorous as bronze, and photographs lacier than the filagree of the frost."[105]

On the other hand, however, Evans's *Port of New York* read as a plausible translation of the book's main theme, that edge of Manhattan that symbolized the country's ambivalent nexus with Europe. The metaphorical narrative that sustained the photograph

103. Gorham Munson, "The Mechanics for a Literary Secession," *S4N*, Vol. 3, No. 22 (November 1922), n.p., quoted in Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 6.

104. Walker Evans, "Photography," in *Quality. Its Image in the Arts*, edited by Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 169–211 (quotation p. 176). According to Evans, during their brief encounter Georgia O'Keeffe "spoke intelligently about my work": letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, March 17, 1929, quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 88.

105. Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, p. 239.

can be traced in the opening of Rosenfeld's epilogue: "The lean voyagers steer under the tower-jumbled point of Manhattan. Flanks are lashed to the town [...] the liners lie roped to their piersides, rows of captives handcuffed to policemen."[106] Yet the ocean liners, Rosenfeld went on, dropped anchor in New York only to leave again the next day; like the American intellectuals they symbolized, they were rootless. In the end, Evans may have sympathized with the lack of belonging that pervaded the book and with Rosenfeld's disaffection for a city that was "loud, anarchical, showy, … unfriendly; flaunting money; calling for money."[107]

What definitely distinguished the two versions of *Port of New York* was their style, both in formal and in rhetorical terms. By portraying a common detail of port life seen in direct sunlight, Evans avoided the romanticism of so many Stiegtlitz icons that depicted tugboats, ferries, steamships, airplanes, and dirigibles as products of modern technology immersed in the infinity of nature. This iconography found a correspondence in Rosenfeld's image of the ocean liners leaving the harbor: "Beyond where eye can reach iron rumps dwindle down the ocean."[108] Beginning with his inaugural series of the Manhattan skyline seen from the Brooklyn Bridge (figs. 15–23), Evans enacted framing and printing strategies that were prophylactic against the dangers of such urban pastoralism. The result was often a defiantly simple fragment, an oblique observation of ordinary life that could be frustrating to the viewer except for the inkling provided by an equally unassuming title. His literary and poetic culture allowed him to evoke a whole gamut of intellectual associations through a limited use of words – an ability that he put to work after the war during his years at *Fortune*.

106. Ibid., p. 281.

107. Ibid., p. 287.

108. Ibid., p. 282. This iconography formed a substantial section of the Stieglitz portfolio published in *Camera Work,* No. 34–35 (April–July 1911). Further examples are *Harbour of Hamburg* and *Venice*, 1911 by Heinrich Kühn and *On the East River, New York*, 1912, by Karl F. Struss, published in *Camera Work*, No. 33 (January 1911) and No. 38 (April 1912), respectively.

On a different level, however, it was precisely the prototype of Stieglitz's *Spiritual America*, 1923 that allowed Evans to present a photographic detail as the allegory of a whole civilization.[109] It is tempting to believe that one of the reasons that prompted his appropriation of Rosenfeld's *Port of New York* was precisely his attempt to challenge the tradition of Stieglitz and his group. By adopting Rosenfeld's image, Evans obliquely (and perhaps mockingly) stated his position in the ongoing debate on American photography and its transatlantic connections, a matter of endless dispute in photographic circles at the end of the 1920s. The reception of the work of Atget is a case in point. In January 1931, only weeks after Evans's *Port of New York* appeared in *Hound & Horn*, Rosenfeld published a review of *Atget: Photographe de Paris*, the first book devoted to the French photographer recently "discovered" in Paris by Berenice Abbott. Titled "Paris, the Artist," the article downplayed the photographer's use of the camera as "a pure instrument of record," underscoring instead the French sense of decoration and the city itself as the characterizing factor of Atget's visuality.[110] Evans's reassessment of Atget in "The Reappearance of Photography," later that year, ran contrary to Rosenfeld's persuasion and to what one may assume was the common opinion in the Stieglitz group. When *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, reviewing the Stieglitz retrospective at An American Place in 1932, wrote incautiously of the old master as a follower of "the great tradition of the Frenchman, Atget and others," Stieglitz in person, backed

109. For Stieglitz's *Spiritual America*, see above, p. 86. The use of minimal captions to mobilize the viewer's interpretation can also be associated to artists like Man Ray, who in 1920 gave the title *New York* to a photograph showing the contents of an overturned ashtray (the following year, the same picture was included in a collage entitled *Trans Atlantique*). Man Ray's photograph was reproduced in *transition*, Vol. 13 (Summer 1928), following p. 239. In the 1960s, Evans made a series of photographs of urban debris that was closely reminiscent of this precedent (WEA 1994.253.791.1–9, 1995.560.12).

110. Paul Rosenfeld, "Paris, the Artist," *The New Republic*, Vol. 65, No. 843 (January 28, 1931), pp. 299–300.

by Herbert J. Seligmann, wrote a piqued response to the *New York Times* adducing his forty-five years of work in the field, unknowing of the work of Atget.[111]

In considering Evans's position within the transatlantic currents of the 1920s that contributed to the iconography of the machine, we have explored four cultural areas that in different ways may have influenced his practice: European books like Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* and Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, probably read with the help of Paul Grotz; the "optimistic" images of American industrial subjects by artists like Charles Sheeler and Louis Lozowick, variously connected to the *Little Review* and the Machine-Age Exposition; Lincoln Kirstein, *Hound & Horn*, and the Harvard graduates who promoted documentary photography as part of their transhistorical and transnational theory of modern art and architecture; and the Stieglitz circle circle, whose members, despite their cosmopolitan stance, strongly advocated the search for an American identity and looked suspiciously at the influence of European culture.

In order to complete this picture, it is necessary to consider a group of photographs in the Walker Evans Archive that address the theme of the industrial landscape from a slightly different perspective. Apparently devoid of any reference to modern theories of art and architecture, these photographs look more sympathetically toward the chaotic landscape of Manhattan's borders described by Rosenfeld as "the slipshod harbor of New York." Some, like the ones that show the S.S. Mexico approaching the docks, possibly taken in 1929, or the S.S. Rex in 1932, suggest that Evans continued to record ordinary, and even stereotypical, aspects of harbor life in parallel with his studies of recent skyscrapers. The approach ranged from formalized pictures in the vein of *S.S. Leviathan,* ideally suitable for publication in magazines like *Die Form* (figs. 27, 29), to

111. [Edward Alden Jewell], "The Week in New York: A Rooster of Recently Opened Shows," *New York Times* (February 21, 1932), p. X10. Letters to the editors by Stieglitz and Seligmann (the latter accusing the reviewer of "imbecility") were published on February 28 (p. X11). See also John Szarkowski, "Understandings of Atget," in Szarkowski, Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. IV, *Modern Times* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), pp. 12 and 31, note 22.

documentary records of no apparent aesthetic interest. Photographs of this kind, often hard to identify because of their generic subjects and lack of captions, turn out to be made in the same Brooklyn area where Evans depicted the modernist grain elevators of the New York State Canal Terminal. They show the Gowanus canal with a gas tank in the background (fig. 621); an industrial building emerging from a heap of rubbish and precarious dwellings in Little Street, Brooklyn (fig. 601); another undistinguished factory, near West 9th Street (fig. 617). Occasionally, these photographs seem to be structured around a juxtaposition of sorts: such is the case of the ship masts and the power plant chimneys that we have already mentioned (fig. 606), or the gas tank and the gravel elevator at Gowanus (fig. 621). In some instances, a nostalgic tone, typical of the iconography of "old New York," seems to prevail (fig. 623).

Because of their descriptive style, quite distant from the formal sophistication of the Manhattan studies, these images can be interpreted as visual notes taken in anticipation of further developments; for the later examples, the influence of Atget's records of "Vieux Paris" can also be conjectured.[112] It is not implausibile to suppose, however, that these photographs taken in Gowanus, relatively far from the modernity of the Financial District and of 42nd Street, were somehow related to Percy Loomis Sperr. Similarities in the work of the two photographers have already been noted with regard to the iconography of the skyscraper (figs. 90–93, 473–474). Although a personal acquaitance cannot be proven at this stage of research, at least two photographs that Evans took in Gowanus provide further evidence that his exploration of New York was connected to the urban survey conducted by Sperr on behalf of the New York Public Library. Evans's views of the New York State Canal Terminal and of the industrial structures adjacent to the Brooklyn Edison Company Plant were taken from identical vantage points as

112. Evans's first encounter with the work of Atget can be dated with Berenice Abbott's return to New York, either in the winter of 1928–1929 or later that year: see Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 111–12. Two photographs by Atget from the Abbott Collection were published in *transition*, No. 15 (February 1929), following p. 124.

Sperr's photographs of the same places (figs. 621–622, 601–602). Evans's awareness of the project of the older photographer may also account for the uncommon decision to photograph in Gowanus, an area that was relatively distant from his favorite tracks.

It is particularly interesting, in the context of Evans's ship and harbor studies, that in the same years Sperr was amassing a substantial body of work on the Port of New York as a symbol of the pre-industrial city threatened by the growth of the modern metropolis. A commercial photographer struggling for a place in the aggressive market of the late 1920s, Sperr specialized in maritime subjects that catered to conservative magazines with a penchant for nostalgia. His business card offers a vivid representation of the composite portrait of New York that he was pursuing, but it is significant that on it he gave prominence to subjects like "New York Harbor: Ships, old and modern; Skylines, Dock Scenes, Harbor Craft, Sunsets, Bridges, Naval Vessels" over the urbanscape of "New York City, all five boroughs" that one would expect from a documentary photographer of the time.[113] It should be noted that most of the metropolitan themes indicated by Sperr – "Old Houses, Foreign Quarters, Pushcarts, Farms, Old New York Scenes" – were also marked by nostalgia for a city that was fast disappearing. In single pictures as in larger series, however, Sperr explored visual tropes that combined, or juxtaposed, elements of New York City's pastoral landscape and manifestations of modern life.[114] If Evans ever crossed paths with Sperr, it is possible that his protracted interest in ocean liners and small tugboats was fueled by the joint passion of the older man for sea life and the city's history, which materialized in an ongoing documentation of the

113. Vertical file, "Photographers – Sperr, Percy L.," NYPL.

114. See Percy Loomis Sperr, *Tall Ships and Tall Buildings: The Harbor of New-York in Photographs* (Staten Island, N.Y., 1932). A similar theme is the subject of a photograph by Sperr, captioned "Masts, Spars and Skyscrapers," illustrating an article by George Fox Horne, "News Gathering on American's Longest Waterfront," *Travel*, Vol. 67, No. 5 (September 1936), pp. 16–19, 47 (Sperr's photograph, p. 18).

vessels that plowed the waters of New York at the turn of the 1930s.[115] The influence of Sperr's catalogue appears even more evident in Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*, a project that she devised in 1929–1930 and that occupied her for most of the decade. Considering the parallel tracks of Evans's and Abbott's career in the early 1930s, however, it is possible that for some time they both saw the anachronistic work of Percy Loomis Sperr, with all due distinctions, as an American counterpart of Atget's lifelong documentation of old Paris.

During the Depression Sperr relocated his activity to Staten Island, where he continued to photograph and to participate in the activities of the local Institute of Arts and Sciences; when the Institute mounted a one-person exhibition of his work in 1934, he was described as "a marine photographer of Fort Wadsworth."[116] Sperr's focus on the natural landscape and his latent anti-urbanism were at odds with the lifestyle and culture of Walker Evans, who was rather attracted by "man's work and the civilization he's built" – a notion that encompassed both the materiality of manmade America (the *urbs*) and the multilayered images produced by artists and intellectuals responding to it (the *polis*).[117] Yet the occasional points of contact between his urban investigations and the work of a documentary photographer like Sperr bring us back to a question that has resurfaced with some regularity in our analysis. Despite his cultivation and intellectual stance, Evans never ceased to look at the sources and the manifestations of popular culture, in the field of photography and more generally in the arts. His learning from the work of Brady and Atget, his possible contact with Sperr, and in the following years his growing interest in picture postcards, are all expressions of the same belief in the "unconscious" products of civilization that Hitchcock and Barr were investigating

115. A substantial collection of Sperr's maritime photographs is in the collection of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Va.

116. "Buys New Staten Island Bungalow," *New York Times* (February 4, 1930), p. 49; "To Exhibit Marine Photos," *New York Times* (February 4, 1934), p. N1. The bulletins of the Staten Island Association (later Institute) of Arts and Sciences list Sperr's membership and activities beginning in 1925.

117. Caplan, "Walker Evans on Himself," p. 26.

in the architectural field.[118] In fact, Evans's entire career can be read as a backward path toward the simplicity of language and the straighforwardness of expression of the American tradition, an attempt to regain the *naïveté* of experience not by way of escapism, but through a direct confrontation with the expressions of the machine age and with the responses of transatlantic art.

The problem of translating the perception of everyday experience into plausible artistic forms without indulging in the pleasures of mimesis was central to the work of many intellectuals of the time. Hart Crane discussed this issue in an illuminating essay written in 1929, while he was concluding the manuscript of *The Bridge*:

> For unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., *acclimatize* it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function. This process does not infer any program of lyrical pandering to the taste of those obsessed by the importance of machinery; nor does it essentially involve even the specific mention of a single mechanical contrivance. It demands, however, along with the traditional qualifications of the poet, an extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life.[119]

Interestingly, the same critique of the "machine idolaters" expressed by Alfred H. Barr in the essay on the Necco Factory was levelled by Crane at contemporary poetry,

118. Evans's interest in the popular iconography of small towns has been the subject of a major exhibition curated by Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

119. Hart Crane, "Modern Poetry," in *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*, edited by Oliver M. Sayler (New York: Brentano's, 1930), pp. 294–98 (quotation p. 296), reprinted in *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, edited by Waldo Frank (New York: Liveright, 1933), pp. 175–79 (quotation p. 181).

perhaps with reference to books like MacKnight Black's *Machinery* published the previous year. But whereas Barr and Hitchcock promoted an analytical response to the forms of industry, Crane suggested a strategy of poetic "absorption" of the language of machinery. Poetry, he implied, is not necessarily "modern" because it describes or imitates the forms of technology; the task of the modern poet is rather to internalize and elaborate the fundamental structures of contemporary existence shaped by the machine. Evans, who at the time was working with the poet on the illustrations for *The Bridge* and continuing his own explorations of Manhattan, followed in the same direction. Crane's idea of modern art as a "self-discipline toward a formal integration of experience" aptly describes the photographer's attempt to articulate a visual text from the growing accumulation of experiences in New York recorded by his camera.[120] Perhaps more importantly, the collaboration between the poet and the photographer proved a fruitful occasion to put into practice the assimilation of the machine in the language or art. A compelling example is the second of the three photographs that Evans contributed to the Paris edition of the book, placed by Crane at the opening of a section entitled "Cape Hatteras" (fig. 62).[121] The photograph, showing a tug and a barge on the East River seen from the perspective of a passerby craning his or her neck from the walkway of the bridge, epitomized the flows of urban production and consumption taking place in the port of New York, perhaps with a reference to Paul Strand's *Overlooking Harbor, New York*, 1916 (fig. 64). Behind both pictures stood Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," with its image of harbor life: "On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges."[122] But considering that the leading theme of the "Cape Hatteras" section was the Brothers Wright's flight and the technology of

120. Ibid., p. 175.

121. For Crane's positioning of the photographs in *The Bridge*, see his letter to Caresse Crosby, December 26, 1929, in *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916–1932*, edited by Brow Weber (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), p. 347.

122. Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856), in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), p. 131.

the airplane, Crane implicitly framed Evans's zenithal view as a fantasy of detachment from "out native clay," a metaphor of the detached elevation that was incorporated and anticipated by the 19th-century bridge. Perhaps more efficiently than Crane's futuristic verse, it was his perceptive understanding of Evans's photograph that fully translated his theory of modern art as a "formal integration of experience."

4.3 Precisionism

If we turn to the visual arts of the 1920s, we can see how these ideas were already in place in depictions of New York made by painters close to Evans, later labelled Precisionists. The relevance of paintings like Niles Spencer's *City Wall*s, 1921 for the visual problems confronted by the photographer in *Wall Street Windows* has already been discussed. A further example is *New York, Lower Manhattan*, painted by Stefan Hirsch in the same year, a view of the city's skyline in which the ships and barges on the East River were rendered as mechanical parts resting on the dark, flat surface of the water (fig. 25). The vantage point and the perspectival order of the scene were clearly recognizable, with the roofs of the Brooklyn warehouses in the foreground suggesting the actual experience of looking out from a window on Columbia Heights; far away in the distance, the tip of a skyscraper under construction provided a temporal anchorage to the actuality of the city. Counterbalancing these elements of realism, Hirsch painted the buildings and the skyscrapers across the river as an accumulation of geometrical shapes, windowless cubicles hit by inconsistent light sources that betrayed the influence of Cubism-Realism.[123] In the first major assessment of Hirsch's work, Stephan Bourgeois spoke in 1927 of "a city of terrific mental activity. Calculations added to calculations with an iron logic,"

123. Milton W. Brown was the first to gauge the American reworkings of Cubism in "Cubist-Realism: An American Style," *Marsyas*, Vol. 3 (1943), pp. 139–58. See also Abraham A. Davidson, "Cubism and the Early American Modernist," *Art Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter 1966–1967), pp. 122–65.

but also of the "quiet deliberation" that informed the painting's general structure.[124] As the artist wrote retrospectively, however, the simplified cubes were also an expression of "recoil from the monstrosity that industrial life had become in 'megalopolitania'."[125]

An artist close to the circle of Alfred Stieglitz, Hirsch found the early studies of Walker Evans interesting enough to suggest an encounter with old master. Although little is known about their subsequent relationship, it is significant that by 1929 Hirsch was actively reading European books of modern architecture such as Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* and Erich Mendelsohn's *Russland Europa Amerika*, as Andrew Hemingway has recently noted in his analysis of Precisionist painters of the machine age.[126] The same sources, as we have seen, probably guided Evans's understanding of modern urbanism: while a concern for the aesthetics and the products of functionalist architecture was a common trait among artists painting the city in the 1920s, it is not unlikely that Hirsch, Evans, and possibly Grotz occasionally discussed the possibilities of cross-fertilization among their respective practices.

A thorough examination of Evans's exposure to Precisionist painting is beyond the scope of this study, but in order to fully understand the cultural implications of his industrial photographs it can be useful to examine one artist, Charles Demuth, who devoted much of his work to similar subjects. Several instances of a possible correlation between Demuth's paintings and Evans's photographs of New York have been mentioned in the preceding paragraphs: *Business*, 1921 (shown at the Machine-Age Exposition of 1927 together with *From the Garden of the Château*, 1921-1925), as one of the precursors of *Wall Street Windows* (figs. 107, 98); *Rue du singe qui pêche*, 1921, an anticipation of Evans's ITT Building (figs. 115, 114); *Paquebot "Paris"*, 1921–1922, an

124. Stephan Bourgeois, "Introduction," in *A Catalogue of Paintings by Stefan Hirsch* (New York: Bourgeois Galleries 1927), n.p.. See also Andrew Hemingway, *The Mysticism of Money: Precisionist Painting and the Machine Age* (Pittsburgh and New York: Periscope, 2013), p. 70.

125. Letter, Stefan Hirsch to Martin Friedman, March 16, 1960, quoted in Martin L. Friedman, *The Precisionist View in American Art* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1960), p. 35.

126. Hemingway, *The Mysticism of Money*, p. 90.

influence for Charles Sheeler's *Upper Deck*, 1929 that may have inspired Evans when he photographed the S.S. President Roosevelt and that he reprised in a portfolio published thirty years later (figs. 35, 37).[127]

Lacking documentary evidence regarding Evans's direct contact with the work of Demuth, it is worth restating that these correspondences should be read less as positive proofs of filiation from specific artworks than as clues to the understanding of the photographer's visual culture in the crucial period of his artistic education.[128] While it is plausible that Evans was fully aware of the debate surrounding Precisionist art in the second half of the 1920s, the issue at stake is not to ascertain whether his operative choices (selection of vantage point, framing, printing, cropping) were consciously made with the aim of "copying" established artworks. Rather, these correspondences allow us to grasp the subtlety and variety of visual problems that lay implicit in Evans's "straight" photographs and that he shared with several artists working in parallels fields.

The striking formal similarities between Evans's photographs and contemporary Precisionist paintings suggest that these problems, contrary to what is usually believed, were not superficially derived from the Cubist or Constructivist canon, but rather stemmed from the work of American intellectuals who were trying to translate the innovations of European art into a national language rooted in the complexities of everyday life.[129] Evans shared this program with colleagues like Ralph Steiner and Berenice Abbott. The issue of America's relationship with European culture, however, ran across all the creative fields, often involving individuals working in painting,

127. See Walker Evans, "Ship Shapes and Shadows," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (October 1958), p. 122.

128. An important source for the circulation of Demuth's work in New York at the turn of the decade was the monograph published by the Whitney Museum in 1931 as part of the American Artists Series, with an essay by William Murrell. The industrial paintings reproduced in the book included *My Egypt*, *Modern Conveniences*, *End of the Parade*, and *Paquebot*.

129. A case in point is the work of Charles Demuth, as discussed in Corn, *The Great American Thing*, pp. 193 ff.

literature, architecture, and film to whom Evans was directly or indirectly connected, such as Hart Crane, Lincoln Kirstein, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Ben Shahn, and Jay Leyda.

The interdisciplinary issues raised by Demuth's "industrial" works painted between 1920 and 1933 and his eccentric position within the Stieglitz group make him an interesting counterpart to Evans's search for artistic identity at the turn of the 1920s. Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to a family of entrepreneurs who owned the oldest tobacco factory in the United States, Demuth graduated in 1901 from Franklin and Marshall Academy and later studied art at various Philadelphia institutions, including the Pennsylvania Academy directed by William Merritt Chase.[130] As a pupil of Thomas Anschuz, he rapidly absorbed the objectivist style and the penchant for everyday subjects typical of painters like William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, and John Sloan, who like Anshutz had studied at the Academy under Thomas Eakins.

Soon, however, Demuth began to admire the work of artists like Whistler, Beardsley, Huysmans, and Oscar Wilde, whose stated Aestheticism stood at the antipodes of the social realism of the Ashcan School. In 1904 he visited Paris for the first time, returning again in 1907 and 1912 for prolonged sojourns that gave him the opportunity to further his training at the studio of Rodin's assistant, Émile Antoine Bourdelle (where Berenice Abbott also studied in 1921) and exchange ideas with Marsden Hartley, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound, among others. During this early period, Demuth painted landscapes and human figures, often using watercolor to experiment with the modernist sensuality apprehended from Rodin. An early friend of William Carlos Williams, he was also active as a writer until 1914, when he first exhibited at the Daniel Gallery in New York and came into contact with many artists of the Stieglitz group.

In the years following the Armory Show, Demuth became acquainted with Marcel Duchamp and the American Dadaists connected to Louise and Walter Arensberg.

130. Information about the artist's education is based on Barbara Haskell's study, *Charles Demuth* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987), pp. 17–33.

During this period, he continued to explore the emotional and symbolic power of watercolors, painting flowers but also developing an original iconography of the social life of cafés and nightclubs that he frequented in the Village.[131]

The eroticism, libertinism, and homosexuality of New York's bohemian mores remained Demuth's major concerns until 1916, when he progressively began to paint urban structures in the linear style of Precisionism. While he also portrayed the landscape and maritime subjects of Cape Cod and Bermuda (fig. 39), the "province" – as he liked to call his hometown – became his focus.[132] Drawing on the visual strategies of Futurism and Cubism, Demuth elaborated a version of Precisionism that amplified the perception of the built environment – the façades of industrial and vernacular buildings, the articulation of space resulting from their assortment, the broken words of advertising and commercial signs – while at the same time achieving a measure of order and simplicity.

Most of these paintings adopted an elevated vantage point and a vertical format, as if looking out from the back window of a small-town building. Demuth generally excluded the lower parts of the view and the animation of street life, directing the viewer's gaze upward, toward the apparent chaos of rear walls, roofs, staircases, water towers, smokestacks, and the luminous blue skies above. Relying on complex orthogonal schemes and on a rich palette of warm colors, he infused these fragments of ordinary experience with a suspended, almost monumental character.[133]

Although Demuth regularly resorted to a standard Futurist technique to increase the spatial ambiguity of the composition – the overlay of translucent areas of color that

131. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, pp. 217 ff.

132. See for instance Demuth's letter to Alfred Stieglitz, c. 1919: "I'm back in the province in the garden of my own chateau": *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883–1935*, edited by Bruce Kellner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 8.

133. The identification of the actual buildings depicted by Demuth is given in Betsy Fahlman, *Pennsylvania Modern: Charles Demuth of Lancaster* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1983), pp. 41, 59.

simulated cast shadows and beams of light cutting across the scene – he never adhered to the celebration of the machine typical of the prewar enthusiasts. On the contrary, as Wanda Corn has observed, Demuth "painted the factory in seemingly elegant fashion, and then, lest he be taken *too* seriously, turned around and critiqued his own subject matter."[134] He often did so by giving his works ironic or hermetic titles, as in *Business* (fig. 107) and *Nospmas, M. Egiap Nospmas, M.* (fig. 659); or by referring to the literary tradition, as in *Aucassin and Nicolette* and *After All* (fig. 618).

The mechanistic character of Demuth's paintings, his interest in sexuality, and his ironic word games can be associated with Francis Picabia's "machine portraits," such as *Portrait d'une jeune fille américaine dans l'état de nudité* and *Ici. C'est ici Stieglitz – Foi et amour*, both of 1915. Dickran Tashjian has suggested that Demuth's "tension between the verbal titles and the visual image" was an application of Duchamp's notion of "meta-irony."[135] As Wanda Corn has noted, however, Demuth's evident ties with French painting and his insistence on everyday subjects set him apart from the Stieglitz group, where he was mostly appreciated for his watercolors and for his floral subjects despite oblique accusations of excessive refinement and femininity.[136] In an oft-cited review published in 1922, Paul Strand found Demuth's work "in no sense as robust and virile as that of [Winslow] Homer" and his "geometrics [...] not as yet instinct with life." Lamenting his inability to "disentangle himself from the sophistication of contemporary French influences," he elected John Marin as the one artist consciously "rooted in this American continent."[137]

134. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 222.

135. Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, pp. 212–13. For Duchamp, "Irony is a playful way of accepting something. Mine is an irony of indifference. It is a 'Meta-irony'," quoted in Albert Cook, "The 'Meta-Irony' of Marcel Duchamp," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 263–70.

136. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 196–97.

137. Paul Strand, "American Water Colors at the Brooklyn Museum," *The Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (January 20, 1922), p. 149–52 (quotations pp. 151, 152). In the same issue, a passing notation in the

Even such a cursory survey of Demuth's early career provides some useful background to the striking affinities that one can detect between his industrial paintings and many of the photographs that Evans took in Brooklyn and Montreal at the end of the 1920s. Comparable combinations of solid mass, cast shadows, curvilinear forms, and fragmented words can be found in the extension of the Grain Elevator No. 3 that Evans recorded in Montreal and in Demuth's *Nospmas, M. Egiap Nospmas, M.*, 1921 (figs. 658, 659). An attempt to emulate the composition of *End of the Parade, Coatesville, Pa.*, 1920 can be guessed in the variant negatives of the Brooklyn Power Plant, with the same overlapping forms of the smokestacks framed by the wall in the foreground and the buildings to the right (figs. 603–605). Even the general arrangement of Evans's small factories on West 9th Street, Brooklyn, seems congruent with *After All*, 1933, Demuth's last oil painting (figs. 617, 618).[138]

It is undeniable that despite these similarities, many factors contribute to the fundamental differences between Demuth's paintings and Evans's photographic studies, color being the most conspicuous. Contrary to Sheeler, Strand, and other photographers of the 1920s who placed a high value on craftmanship, Evans seemed relatively uninterested in the modulations of natural light and the control of tonal values in the

unsigned "Comments on the Arts" expressed the opposite opinion regarding the question of Demuth's work as "a pastiche of French art" (p. 226). And again, according to a reviewer of the Chicago Arts Club exhibition of 1921, Demuth, Man Ray, and Preston Dickinson, were not "repeating or imitating the European cubists, post-impressionists. They have derived much from these Frenchmen, but they have assimilated it thoroughly and now are using it in the creation of something American, undeniably their own.": Hi Simons, "At Chicago," *The Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (November 1921), pp. 95–98 (quotation p. 97).

138. Contrary to Demuth's earlier works, which Evans may have seen in several exhibitions and publications in the 1920s, *After All* raises important issues regarding the chronology and the influences of Evans's industrial photographs. Painted in 1933, two years before the painter's death, the canvas was included in the Second Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting that opened at the Whitney Museum in November 1934 and reproduced on the frontispiece of the accompanying catalogue.

final print, placing instead particular focus on aspects of picture-taking that are most connected to the actual experience of place, such as selection of subject matter, choice of vantage point, and framing. Most of his industrial photographs considered so far were taken from street level and appear as records of a common act of observation, often devoid of recognizable "artistic" qualities. Occasionally, however, original negatives and variant prints can disclose unsuspected intentions, as in the case of a photograph of the Grain Elevator No. 3 taken during his trip to Montreal in 1929. By radically cropping contextualizing elements in the lower part of the scene, Evans enhanced the geometrical order of the composition in a manner that was consistent with most of Demuth's industrial paintings (fig. 618).

Similar strategies can be seen at work in two photographs of an unidentified Brooklyn building that Evans probably took in 1928 or 1929 (figs. 630–631). Returning to the same spot on different days and using different cameras, he made two variants of the same subject by experimenting with the configuration of cast shadows and moving the vantage point slightly to the side. The resulting image is perhaps Evans's closest to a Precisionist painting, both for its industrial subject and for its style. And while it shows some influence of Demuth's compositions and use of cast shadows, it is also reminiscent of more Constructivist-oriented works like Lozowick's *City Shapes*, 1922–1923 (figs. 632).[139]

The inspiration that Evans may have drawn from the work of Demuth extends to vernacular subjects and materials found in the city, such as the wooden staircase that he photographed on Fulton Street and that was included in his first published portfolio in 1930. Although it deflected from Demuth's frontal scheme, the picture restated

139. Evans may have come into contact with Lozowick through their common friend, Ralph Steiner, who was also among the organizers of the Machine-Age Exposition. Another point of contact may have been Ben Shahn, whom Evans befriended in 1929 and who in 1926 is thought to have printed Lozowick's *Backyards of Broadway (Waterfront I)*. See Janet Flint, *The Prints of Louis Lozowick: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1982), p. 56, cat. 7.

the structure of paintings like *Stairs, Provincetown,* 1920 or more probably *Modern Conveniences*, 1921, especially in the "unconscious" geometry of the handrails and in the grid of the six-pane window (figs. 142–144).[140]

Finally, Demuth's precedent may also explain an isolated study in the Walker Evans Archive, showing a water tank on the roof of the Osborne Apartments on Seventh Avenue and 57th Street with Central Park in the background (figs. 483–485). Water towers, together with grain elevators, tanks, and coal pockets, were often discussed in architectural debates addressing the relationship between form and function, as in Barr's article on the "ornaments" on top of the Necco Factory and in Paine's assessment of the Red Cross Building.They were also a recurring theme among Precisionist artists, for whom they represented diverging aspects of modern civilization. The technological optimism of the Machine-Age Exposition, for instance, is reflected in a series of lithographs made by Louis Lozowick in 1929, in which the cold beauty of industrial tanks was rendered through a sophisticated combination of minimalism and chiaroscuro (fig. 482).[141] In Lancaster, Demuth repeatedly painted water towers as symbols of an older type of industrialism, in which mechanical forms merged with the vernacular structures of small-town America to create a new environment fraught with uncertainty and fear.[142] As Martin Friedman has suggested, these paintings "suggest a cultivated eighteenth-century mentality regarding with amusement and refined disdain the systematic obliteration of its epoch."[143] Occasionally, as in *Machinery*, 1920 (fig. 484), dedicated to William Carlos Williams, a cyclone separator could be morphed into a

140. See also Evans's *License Photo Studio*, 1934 (fig. 177) for Evans's later version of the same visual theme.

141. A photograph of a coal pocket was reproduced in the catalogue of the Machine-Age Exposition (p. 14).

142. Betsy Fahlman, *Chimneys and Towers: Charles Demuth's Late Paintings of Lancaster* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 95 ff.

143. Friedman, *The Precisionist View in American Art*, p. 25.

sexualized symbol of womanness, even "faking the psychological appearance of the machine, making perhaps 'a woman' of it, so that it appears to be what it is not."[144]

Although visually similar to Lozowick's lithographs, the water tower recorded by Evans on 57th Street, especially if considered in the larger perspective of his New York project, shares with Demuth's paintings a subtler understanding of the layered palimpsest of American culture at such a crucial juncture as the late 1920s. Many aspects of Demuth's career, including the selective reception of his work among the members of the Stieglitz circle, shed a revealing light on the latent meanings of the Walker Evans Archive. While often unsuccessful or incomplete, the photographer's attempt to achieve a balance between the cultivation of the European avant-garde and the worldliness of American realism has an important precedent in Demuth's Lancaster paintings.

Discounting the obvious differences between media, the same tension between the material reality of the picture plane and the memory (or the experience) of a place sustains the work of both artists.[145] Equally important, their choice of subject matter was a crucial factor of their artistic program: while Demuth's passion for the buildings, the commercial signs, and the "unconscious" aesthetic small-town America was not exceptional in the 1920s, he was unique in his ability to blend the teaching of Cézanne, Futurism, and Cubism with the structures of ordinary life, recognizing the importance of both for the conception of an art for the modern public, rather than a self-proclaimed "modern American art" or, conversely, a supposedly democratic "art for the masses."

Reluctant to accept the optimism of technology and to translate the language of the machine into an artistic credo, Demuth and Evans rejected the overconfident and "virile" clarity displayed in the works and the writings of Charles Sheeler (Demuth's fellow student at the Pennsylvania Academy), Louis Lozowick, and other artists later grouped under the label of Precisionism – which Lincoln Kirstein once dubbed "the

144. William Carlos Williams, "Postscript by a Poet," *Art in America*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (October 1954), p. 215.

145. Fahlman, *Pennsylvania Modern*, p. 21.

frigidaire school of immaculate nonsense."[146] Maintaining a cosmopolitan stance based on a first-hand experience of European culture and refinement, both artists cultivated a transatlantic version of modernism that set them apart from the main currents of American thought. It is significant that a major critique levelled at Demuth's architectural paintings in the years preceding the birth of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum – his supposed obedience to the "sophistication of contemporary French influences" – has found an exact counterpart in the deep-seated dismissal of Evans's urban photographs as superficial interpretations of "Cubist" or "Constructivist" painting. What is often missed in the understanding of Evans's early work is the degree of irony and detachment with which he expressed his consciously ambivalent position within the system of the arts in late-1920s New York – an irony that occasionally transpires from his photographs, his titles, and the paratexts that accompanied his published and exhibited works.

While Evans's interpretation of the machine age discloses hidden aspects of his cultural formation, it is also a key element of his New York project and of his critique of modern urbanism. Although quantitatively limited, his explorations of the Gowanus area mark a significant departure from the photographic image of New York that emerged in architectural circles of the 1920s. The city's industrial subjects were either completely absent from the most advanced books published at the time, such as Mendelsohn's *Amerika* (which designated Chicago as *the* American industrial city), or were subsumed into the complacent pastoralism of publications like Lubschez's *Manhattan: Magical Island*.[147] Evans's specific interest in the New York State Canal Terminal, as noted above, was probably related to the work of Percy Loomis Sperr; in the context of his

146. Lincoln Kirstein, "Philip Reisman," *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (April–June 1933), p. 441.

147. In the Lubschez book industrial buildings were practically absent, with only two consequent photographs devoted respectively to the East River Power House and the Brooklyn Power House, followed by a night view of the city as if to suggest a functional connection between the power plants and the importance of electric power for the "great white way": see Lubschez, *Manhattan: The Magical Island*, pp. 72–73.

New York project, however, it signals a strategy of reintegration of the city's unplanned, forgotten, or "unconscious" growth, similar to his photographs depicting the rear façades of major Manhattan skyscrapers. Familiar with the current debate on modern architecture and aware of the centrality of industrial themes for contemporary art, in Gowanus Evans explored a cultural geography that was closer to Demuth's "province" than the "industrial mythos" of Sheeler's Rouge. Grain elevators and small factories, residential buildings and industrial structures, smokestacks and clotheslines formed an unexpected mix of spontaneous urban forms that was at odds with the stereotypical iconography of Henry James's "pin-cushion in profile." Meanwhile, the mirror image of this new, ambivalent city was taking shape in Manhattan, where the industrial forms of the Allied Arts Building and of the Beaux Arts Apartments were beginning to change the face of Second Avenue (figs. 421–424). It was somewhere in Gowanus, one suspects, that in the early 1930s Evans discovered that sense of diffused urbanity that would soon lead him to explore the built environment of Middletown and Main Street America.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WRITING ON THE WALL: WORDS, SIGNS, AND SCREENS OF THE METROPOLIS

5.1 Surface and mass

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Evans's early work revolved largely around the forms, the surfaces, and occasionally the spaces of modern architecture. I have suggested that these photographs, often interpreted as formal experiments derived from European art, can be better understood within the framework of Evans's larger project on New York at that crucial juncture of the late 1920s. From this perspective, these pictures appear to function as recorded bits of urban experience rather than as autonomous "compositions"; their simplification of surfaces, their repetition of form, and their ambiguities of space and scale, were all characters of the built environment shared (perhaps unconsciously) by growing numbers of New Yorkers walking the city's streets or working in tall office buildings. As the sole signifier of itself, the modern skyscraper was becoming the morpheme of a new hermetic language that had no use for narrative, symbolic, or pictorial vocabularies of the past. Adolf Loos had anticipated these issues in his 1908 essay, "Ornament and Crime," in which he proclaimed: "Soon the streets of the cities will glow like white walls!"[1] In Loos's view, the outer aspect of a cigarette case, a modern building, or even a new aristocrat should be made to hide individuality, rather than display marks of distinction. Evans's portrait of modern New York as a city of blank, geometric volumes seemed to question the Loosian credo that "freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength," suggesting that it could also be seen as

1. Adolf Loos, "Ornament und verbrechen" (1908), trans. Michael Mitchell "Ornament and Crime," in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays,* edited by Adolf Opel (Riverside, Cal.: Ariadne Press, 1997), p. 167.

a symptom of modernist aphasia. Rather than providing a definitive answer, however, Evans's photographs replicated and condensed for the viewer the latent uncertainties of metropolitan life.

This ambivalent aspect of Evans's project becomes more evident if we consider a second important theme that he explored in New York: the semiotics of advertising and consumption inscribed in the city's billboards, posters, neon signs, theatre marquees, sandwich boards, and store windows. An undated note in the Walker Evans Archive indicates that he was particularly interested in the vernacular landscape created by the varieties of commercial culture:

> PAINTED SIGNS
> Lex. Ave on W. side betw 34th and ~~40th~~ 38th, hat and shoe
> the baseball player on Greenwich St (?)
> wagons, particularly fish and moving vans.
> poultry signs[2]

In fact, the mute kaleidoscope of modern architecture and the cacophonous discourse of commercialism were complementary expressions of the capitalist city. Expanding beyond the colorful pages of illustrated magazines, the scientific management of the marketing industry began to use the city itself as a vehicle for consumer communication. While the New York City 1916 Zoning Resolution had begun to regulate the profile of tall buildings, urban advertising continued to expand with relative freedom during the 1920s. By the time Evans began photographing New York in 1928, billboards and neon signs, first accepted as a distinctive feature of commercial areas such as Broadway and Times Square, had become so invasive of urban public spaces, suburban roads, and natural landscapes as to provoke widespread criticism. Speaking of the Great White

2. Evans, undated manuscript, WEA 1994.250.8 (3).

Way in 1921, G. K. Chesterton protested: "What a sublime fairyland this would be to anyone who by some good fortune could not read!"[3] With the onset of the Depression, the distance between the ideal world promised by advertising and the decay of the real city became even more poignant.

Grappling with the words and images of advertising was not uncommon among interwar intellectuals trained in European art and literature. 19th-century visual poetry, Cubism, and Dada had all explored the possibilities of incorporating everyday words into the work of art by way of montage, collage, or direct quotation.[4] A lively debate about advertising as a source of inspiration and a recognizable expression of an original "American" art had been developed since the beginning of the decade.[5] Yet Evans had stringent reasons to develop a sour critique of commercial culture. A would-be writer raised in the era of high Modernism, Andrei Codrescu has claimed, he shared with his contemporaries "an awe of the word" that corresponded to the "total mistrust of what words had come to mean in the bourgeois world."[6] But even before he joined the "esthetic and literary revolution" of the 1920s, as he defined it, Evans had witnessed firsthand the joint effects of middle-class values and consumer culture.[7] His father, Walker Evans Jr., had been head of the copy department of Lord & Thomas, a prominent advertising firm in Chicago, where he worked under the tutelage of the prominent Albert Lasker.[8] It was because of this new job that in 1908 the family had moved to

3. "Chesterton Sees Misuse of Lights on Broadway," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1921, p. 16.

4. David E. Shi, "Advertising and the Literary Imagination During the Jazz Age," *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1979), pp. 167–75.

5. Alain Weill, "Advertising Art," in *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, edited by Jean Clair (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), pp. 226–35; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 140–8.

6. *Walker Evans: Signs*, with an essay by Andrei Codrescu (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998), p. 1.

7. Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," p. 84.

8. Cummings, *Oral history interview with Walker Evans*, n.p. Lasker was responsible for ground-

Chicago from St. Louis, and it was for this reason that Walker was raised in the suburb of Kenilworth, which later in his life he characterized as an "imitation, English, pastoral, socially, artificial town" of "privileged people with a certain amount of money and security."[9] Although willing to concede that the prewar advertising machine was "not at all corrupt the way it became later," Evans remembered with disdain one of his father's first assignments at Lord & Thomas, a restyling of the Aunt Jemima pancake flour ad that carried the then-famous catchphrase, "I'se in town, Honey!."[10] Based on these precedents, Codrescu has interpreted Evans's lifelong obsession with painted signs as a crypto-Freudian "journey along the father's body."[11] As Evans wrote in 1930,

> The outlook is hopeless. It is the end. Really, this lament is silly at this stage. The whole world is going to manufacture, buy, and sell goods violently, madly, and exclusively for some time to come. It hurts cultivated people, of course, this victorious commercialism.[12]

breaking campaigns for such companies as Lucky Strike and Palmolive: for a contemporary portrait, see George H. Allen, "Albert Davis Lasker," *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 19, No. 12 (October 13, 1932), pp. 21–22, 35–37.

9. Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, pp. 6–7. For information about the professional career of Evans's father, see "Walker Evans, Jr.," *Printing*, Vol. 57, No. 8 (May 1933), p. 76; "Walker Evans, Jr., Dies," *Printers' Ink*, Vol. 163, No. 8 (May 25, 1933), p. 92; "Walker Evans, Jr.," *Automobile Topics*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (May 13, 1933), p. 46.

10. An Aunt Jemima poster is recorded in a 1938 negative fragment made as part of Evans's project on subway portraits (WEA 1994.253.517.1a). Evans's memory of his father's assignment at Lord & Thomas is recounted in Brendan Gill, "The Art of Seeing," *New Yorker*, Vol. 42, No. 44 (December 24, 1966), pp. 26–27, abridged version in Ibid., *A New York Life: Of Friends and Others* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990), pp. 302–5. Contrary to what Gill's article leads to believe, Evans's father did not compose the famous copy, which had first been presented at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. See Maurice M. Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained: The Old South, the Absent Mistress, and the Slave in a Box," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 1995), pp. 19–44.

11. *Walker Evans: Signs*, p. 10.

12. Evans, review manuscript of John Langdon-Davies, *Dancing Catalans* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929) (WEA 1994.250.3 [50]), published in *Alhambra*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 1930), p. 44.

Nonetheless, throughout 1930 and 1931 Evans continued to photograph New York's billboards, signs, posters, and shop windows, both privately and, briefly, on commission. Social critic Gilbert Seldes, who spoke from the inside, wrote in 1933 that "A generation cradled in advertising had, at the same time, begun to make fun of advertising."[13] This double entendre was a distinguishing character of Evans's early work. According to Alan Trachtenberg, one of his most insightful critics, it was out of a "bemused disapproval" that he began to experiment with New York's advertising, before he developed a more empathic approach in the mid-1930s.[14]

The following pages will provide a deeper background on the debates that accompanied the expansion of commercial speech into the streets of New York, with particular attention to intellectual milieu with which Evans had become familiar in the 1920s. A substantial part of this chapter will be devoted to a in-depth examination of his photographs, in the attempt to decode some of their meanings and to provide a map of the conceptual strategies he developed to depict the signs of New York. This analytic focus should not distract us from the dialectical character of Evans's project. By photographing skyscrapers and billboards side by side – the "mute" forms of modern architecture and the unstable flow of words of advertising – Evans hinted at the paradoxically transient character of the urban environment, its surface value, or, as he wrote in 1931, the inherent commercial ideology of the "Chrysler period."[15] At the same time, by accompanying his records of the urban environment with words drawn from the advertising and cinematographic discourse, he addressed the question of photography's relation to the textual and the literary – a conceptual issue that found its mature expression in *American Photographs* and that was to occupy him throughout his life.[16]

13. Gilbert Seldes, *The Years of the Locust (America, 1929–1932)* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1933), p. 109.

14. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 241.

15. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 127.

16. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 240 ff.

5.2 Advertising and visual culture in New York

The written text that formed the background of urban life recorded by Evans, and the physical spaces in which these words were inscribed, had begun to take shape in the 19th century. According to David M. Henkin, commodified print culture had already expanded beyond the limits of the newspaper page in antebellum New York, where a "verbal frenzy" of signs, posters, and billboards could be seen on the façades, the walls, the fences, and even the sidewalks of the city's busiest areas. Permanent landmarks of private and public property coexisted with ephemeral signs produced by a variety of urban actors. Far from being "a stable, univocal, and self-adequate system of representation," Henkin argues, the language of the city required a new type of literacy, or the citizen's ability to discern messages conveyed by concurrent systems of signs, often changing at a rapid pace and unconnected to the urban space in which they were posted. Words posted in public spaces blurred the lines "between politics and commerce, interested and disinterested authority, information and exhortation, judgment and promotion."[17] Although this new system of communication did not erase social inequality, class conflicts, and established structures of power, it created a unifying frame of reference and shaped a public sphere in which individuals and groups had the opportunity to form opinions, negotiate their identity, and interact with one another.

In the early decades of the 20th century, according to cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears, mass advertising began to transform the lives of millions of American citizens, creating a fictional universe that functioned as "a new and secular basis for capitalist cultural hegemony."[18] This spatial hegemony meant more than just a new economic

17. David M. Henkin, *Reading the City: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 11.

18. T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 4.

opportunity for merchants and their advertising agencies. According to Lears, the ubiquity and redundance of consumerist values was part and parcel of a "therapeutic ethos [that] offered harmony, vitality, and the hope of self-realization" to urban dwellers suffering "nervous prostration" in an age of progressive mechanization and anonimity.[19] Illustrated magazines always remained strategic for the diffusion of consumer values among large audiences and as powerful tools for market research.[20] Advertising campaigns altered the visual economy of the printed press, with increasing space dedicated solely to the publicization of products and companies on a daily or weekly basis. But in the late 1920s it was also the city itself (and New York in particular) that rapidly turned into a major vehicle for the dissemination of the advertising discourse. Placed at street intersections and atop tall buildings, designed to attract the eye of sidewalk strollers and automobile drivers, billboards, posters, electric signs, neon lights, and animated displays formed a substantial superstructure that interfered with, and often modified, the rational order of urban space regulated by zoning ordinances and real estate values.[21] In its earliest stage of development, urban advertising had been a crucial factor in the "invention" of public spaces such as Broadway and Times Square, creating a myth of the Great White Way that was often emulated by small towns all over the country.[22] In the interwar period, the advertising industry began to enlist architects, economists, social psychologists, writers, and artists to devise scientific strategies of space occupation that potentially invested the entire surface of the city. According to a handbook issued by the Outdoor

19. Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," p. 11. See also Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, pp. 336–41.

20. Christopher P. Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Consumption: Mass-Market Magazines and the Demise of the Gentle Reader, 1880–1920," in Ibid., pp. 39–64.

21. "Electric Displays Bring Heavy Rents," *New York Times*, June 16, 1929, p. RE2. For an overview on New York, see William Leach, "Commercial Aesthetics – Introductory Essay," in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, edited by William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), pp. 234–42.

22. Catherine Gudis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 127 ff.

Advertising Association of America in 1928, during the previous decade the volume of organized street publicity skyrocketed from 15 to 85 million dollars, largely as a consequence of the standardization of posters and advertising spaces. Targetable areas included

> the downtown retail, shopping, and general business districts, including the theatrical and restaurant centers, the important neighborhood retail, shopping, and amusement districts, the terminals of railroads, bus lines, ferries, boat lines, suburban and interurban transportation lines, the transfer points of greatest importance on all local public carriers, bridge approaches, principal boulevards or through automobile thoroughfares within corporate limits of the town or city, or immediately outside corporate limits covering entrances to the city.[23]

This organized scheme for the occupation of public space was merely the culmination of two decades of unrestricted development. Critics of the billboard had begun to voice their concerns relatively soon, often in conjunction with national and international movements for the preservation of landscape, such as the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society founded in 1896.[24] Speaking at the Eighth Annual Convention of the American Civic Association in 1912, Raymond B. Fosdick counted 3,700 billboards in New York, 25 percent of them being two-stories high; actual measurement of one third of them indicated a total of 3.8 million square feet of advertising surface.[25] In addition to being a hazard in case of fire and to providing "hiding places

23. *Outdoor Advertising: The Modern Marketing Force. A Manual for Business Men and Others Interested in the Fundamentals of Outdoor Advertising* (Chicago: Outdoor Advertising Association of America, 1928), pp. 29, 108.

24. Anthony C. Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect A City's Landmarks* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 27.

25. Raymond B. Fosdick, *A Report on an Investigation of Billboard Advertising in the city of New York* (New York: M. B. Brown, 1912), pp. 7–8.

and retreats for many classes of miscreants," Fosdick claimed, billboards diminished the real estate value of adjoining properties, both private and public: "To what purpose – he wrote – do we erect a Century Theater on Central Park and Sixty-second Street and spend thousands of dollars in making it architecturally beautiful, if 60 feet of double-decker billboards are stuck up next door?"[26]

Similar preoccupations came to be shared by many intellectuals. Artist Joseph Pennell, for instance, was a vocal advocate for the regulation of outdoor advertising. A representative of the American Federation of Art, in 1920 he delivered a paper against the "Menace of the Bill Board" at the convention of the Federation of Women's Clubs in Des Moines. While his attack was levelled mainly at the problem of national scenery "stolen by the billboard man," he also discussed the consequences of advertising in New York, whose downtown "is going to be covered with advertisements of pills, piffle, cigarettes, and chewing gum, especially chewing gum."[27] Pennell illustrated his lectures with sketches in his own hand, five of which were reproduced in the *American Magazine of Art*.[28] In these caricaturized views of suburban America, the blight of the billboard was exacerbated by a crude, almost childish drawing style, with smears of black ink that amplified the general sense of drabness and disfigurement. By underscoring the slogans addressing bodily functions – "SALE BUY EAT DRINK CHEW" – Pennell's sketches expounded the demeaning rhetoric of mass advertising (fig. 452).

26. Ibid., "Big Billboards in Big Cities," *The American City*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1912), p. 511–17.

27. Joseph Pennell, "Menace of the Bill Board," in The General Federation of Women's Clubs, *Official Report: Fifteenth Biennial Convention, June 16–23, 1920, Des Moines, Iowa, 1920*, compiled and edited by Adam Weiss, pp. 112–22 (quotations pp. 118–119). See also "Joseph Pennell Denounces Unsightly Outdoors Advertising – Interrupted at Meeting," *New York Times*, March 30, 1920, p. 15; "Joseph Pennell Attacks Billboards," *The Architect and Engineer*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (March 1920), p. 96. For a defensive response of the advertising industry, see S. C. Lambert, "Poster or Persian Garden?," *Printers' Ink*, Vol. 110, No. 7 (February 12, 1920), pp. 57–58.

28. "The Bill Board Menace. A Series of Sketches by Joseph Pennell," *American Magazine of Art*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (January 1920), pp. 94–97.

On the appreciative side, only months after Pennell's indictment, *Broom* editor and critic Matthew Josephson published "The Great American Billposter," a well-known essay in which he praised the language of advertising as a native form of American art. Josephson not only accepted the fact that words and expressions coined by the marketing industry had a significant impact on the evolution of common language, but even claimed that "the American business man, in the short daily time at his disposal, reads the most daring and ingenuous literature of the age."[29] The essay did not discuss the omnipresence of the billboard in the city, but recapitulated a recent discussion opposing supporters and detractors of America's "material environment." The debate had been launched earlier that year by fantasy writer James Thorne Smith with a critical essay on the evils of advertising included in *Civilization in the United States*, a symposium edited by cultural critic Harold E. Stearns in collaboration with Van Wyck Brooks. Smith offered a variety of arguments to support his disdain for the professions and the products of advertising, an activity that he associated with "all that is base and gross in our physical and spiritual compositions." In addition to creating "addle-brained and fickle" consumers, he claimed, indiscriminate advertising favored over-production and an inflated job market. Although Smith made minor concessions to the positive influence of the trade on the art of typography, the article with concluded with the admonishment that outdoor advertising "is bad beyond expression and should be removed from sight with all possible haste."[30]

Invited by the editors of *The Dial*, in June George Santayana published a series of glosses on the book, which began with the observation that "the spirit of these critics is one of offended sensibility. Things shock them. […] They seem to be morally underfed, and they are disaffected." Commenting upon Smith's proposal to prohibit billboards

29. Matthew Josephson, "The Great American Billposter," *Broom*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (November 1922), pp. 304–12 (quotation p. 309).

30. J. Thorne Smith, "Advertising," in *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans*, edited by Harold E. Stearns (New York: Hartcour, Brace and Co., 1922), pp. 383, 395.

altogether, he spoke of a radical "reversion to antiquity," a nostalgia for the peace and leisure of premodern culture. At a general level, Santayana associated modern American civilization with "the sharp masculine eye [that] sees the world as a moving-picture – rapid, dramatic, vulgar, to be glanced at and used merely as a sign of what is going to happen next." With reference to the French concept of *milieu*, he cast American modernism as "the expression of a present material environment," a unity generated by a heterogeneous material and social structure that constantly discarded its memories in order to live in a perennial actuality.[31]

Josephson's article took its cue from Smith's indictment and Santayana's rebuttal to celebrate American advertising as an expression of "that effervescent revolving cacophonous milieu [...] where the Billposters enunciate their wisdom, the Cinema transports us, the newspapers intone their gaudy jargon."[32] Presenting several examples of magazine and newspaper ads, Josephson compared favorably the copy of Campbell's oxtail soup to Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. It should be noted that while his appreciation of the language of advertising was a provocative challenge to the genteel tradition, his literary standards remained partly rooted in the past. While Josephson detected the structure of alexandrine verse in a 1922 Packard Twin-Six ad, a more radical type of poetry was beginning to emerge in the United States. In 1927, Eugène Jolas began to write in *transition* magazine that "disintegration" was the first step toward a new poetry, obviously championing Joyce as a precursor.[33] Two years later, he published "The Revolution of the Word," a literary manifesto against "the hegemony of the banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, descriptive naturalism," in which he defended the right of "the literary creator [...] to disintegrate the primal matter of

31. George Santayana, "Marginal Notes on Civilization in the United States," *The Dial*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (June 1922), pp. 553–68, quotations pp. 567, 554, 555. See also *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Eight, 1948–1952*, edited and with an introduction by William G. Holzberger (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 74.

32. Josephson, "The Great American Billposter," p. 305.

33. [Eugène Jolas,] "Suggestions for a New Magic," *transition*, No. 3 (June 1927), pp. 178–79.

words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries."[34] Arguably, both Josephson's embrace of commercial culture and Jolas's call for a disintegration of received language had a deep effect on Evans's own verses and on his fragmented photographs of New York billboards.[35]

The importance of the "billboard poetics" for the visual arts of the 1910s and '20s has long been acknowledged. Following a long tradition of 19th-century draftsmen and illustrators who recorded, not without irony, the proliferation of posters and broadsides on the walls of New York (figs. 329, 330), American artists of the Ashcan School began to portray the cluttered space of the commercial city.[36] A case in point is John Sloan's *Hairdresser's Window* (1907), a painting based on a scene that the artist witnessed on Lexington Avenue near 40th Street (fig. 189). The painting depicts a frontal view of a tenement façade plastered with advertising signs, except for an open window on the second floor framing a hairdresser, her assistant, and their client, and the shop windows on the ground floor displaying a mannequin and two mannequin heads. Compressed in the shallow space of the picture, a small crowd of passersby seen from the back observes the scene. The social engagement of early-20th-century realist painters like Sloan should not detract from their conceptual awareness of issues related to urban display and panopticism. According to Susan Fillin-Yeh, for instance, a

34. [Eugène Jolas,] "The Revolution of the Word," *transition*, No. 16–17 (June 1929), p. 13. See also Michael Finney, "Eugène Jolas, *transition*, and the Revolution of the Word," in *In the Wake of the Wake*, edited by David Hayman and Elliott Anderson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 39–53.

35. Jolas's views on poetry published in the second half of the 1920s may have influenced the notions of "lyric documentary" and "documentary *style*" that Evans fully developed as a teacher in the 1960s. Compare the remarks of the photographer on "instinct," "transcendence," and police documents in Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans", pp. 85, 87 and Eugène Jolas, "On the Quest," *transition*, No. 9 (June 1929), pp. 191–96.

36. Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 55–59.

close parallel can be drawn between *Hairdresser's Window* and Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915).[37]

In 1916, the inaugural issue of Robert Coady's *The Soil* carried a double-page spread in which a painting by synchromist artist Stanton MacDonald-Wright was ironically set against the photograph of a window display designed by Gilbert McGowan, a window dresser of F. R. Tripler & Co., a New York City haberdashery (fig. 588).[38] Months later, Coady repeated the same scheme contrasting Juan Gris's *Man at a Café* (1912) and a photographic view of the Monroe Clothes Shop on Broadway at 42nd Street, "an exhibition of pictures hung in visible order, and hung under the most trying circumstances in the midst of a real 'battle of lights' at Broadway and Forty-second Street" (fig. 536).[39] Aiming his polemics at the recent Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters and at the Society of Independent Artists, Coady complained about the "isms" of the art world and called for "an appreciation of the aesthetic wealth all around us, within beck and call and reach and at our very doors."[40]

It was mostly in the following decade, as Wanda Corn has noted, that painters like Arthur Davies, Gerald Murphy, and Charles Demuth absorbed the language and aesthetics of commercial culture in the Precisionist idiom of the machine age.[41] Paintings like Demuth's *Business*, 1921 (fig. 107), his "poster portraits" of the 1920s (most notably *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928, dedicated to William Carlos Williams), and *Buildings,*

37. Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Images as Imaginary Documents: John Sloan's Sidewalks and Thresholds*, in Heather Campbell and Joyce C. Schiller, *John Sloan's New York* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 116–49, esp. 143.

38. *The Soil*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (December 1916), following p. 18.

39. Robert Coady, "The Indeps," *The Soil*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (July 1917), pp. 202–10 (photographs after p. 210). Coady implicitly referred to Joseph Stella's *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913–1914.

40. Ibid., p. 205. See the exhibition catalogue, *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, The Anderson Galleries, March 13–25, 1916 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1916).

41. Wanda M. Corn, *In the American Grain: The Billboard Poetics of Charles Demuth* (Poughkeepsie. N.Y.: Vassar College, 1991) and *The Great American Thing*, passim.

Lancaster, 1930 (fig. 229) are all variously indebted to the poetics of the billboard, but they show how the same source of inspiration can be treated by the same artist in significantly different ways. While *Business* (discussed in chapter three) was a post-Cubist appropriation of the planar qualities of printed matter, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* accentuated the decomposition of forms to convey a synesthetic impression of metropolitan life; in the perspectival order of *Buildings, Lancaster*, only slightly contradicted by the broken surfaces at the bottom, the luminous replica of an Eshelman sign and the aerial view of the city's buildings are brought back to unity, as joint expressions of the same pragmatic culture.

Unlike writers and painters, photographers interested in the urban environment had little possibility to contravene the laws of perspective of their medium and of the city itself. While early examples of an interest in posters and advertising can be traced back to antebellum New York, these photographs generally exploited the same potential for reproduction celebrated by William Henry Fox Talbot in *The Talbotype Applied to Hieroglyphics*, published in 1846.[42] In the 1850s, French artist Victor Provost made extensive records of the commercial signs plastering the buildings and warehouses of South Street.[43] This theme was further developed in the following decade by the firm of E. & H. T. Anthony & Co., whose stereographs of New York street scenes conveyed the illusion of a spatial experience of the city's verbal tapestry – a reinscription of the urban spectacle within the reading practices of the domestic parlor.

Photography's power to intensify the perception of the urban text was fully exploited by commercial photographers of the following generation. A striking example is *The*

42. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Talbotype Applied to Hieroglyphics* (Reading: Privately printed, 1846). See Ricardo A. Caminos, "The Talbotype Applied to Hieroglyphics," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 52 (December 1966), pp. 65–70; Mirjam Brusius, "Inscriptions in a Double Sense: The Biography of an Early Scientific Photograph of Script," *Nuncius: Journal of the History of Science*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2009), pp. 367–92.

43. Julie Mellby, "Victor Prevost: Painter, Lithographer, Photographer," *History of Photography*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2011), pp. 221–39.

Brooklyn Bridge Promenade and Manhattan Terminal, showing the proliferation of billboards and painted signs on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, recorded by a photographer of the Detroit Publishing Company in the fall of 1907 (fig. 65).[44] The view differed from most 19th-century precursors for an outstanding level of technical precision that signaled a whole new approach to the semiotics of the city. While traditional drawings conveyed an impressionistic and sometimes hyperbolic image of urban signs, modern photographs offered the opportunity of recording the composite text of advertising in the most accurate and inclusive way. A whole democratic catalogue of early 20th-century consumption is displayed in this photograph, mixing Royal Bengals (a cigar brand) and Neuralgine, Hearn Dry Goods and Chas. H. Fletcher's Castoria (a laxative syrup). Peering above the carriages of the Brooklyn Rapid Transit and the passers-by taking a stroll on the promenade are the portraits of actors Francis Wilson (in the jolly farce *When Knights Were Bold*) and Lillian Albertson (*The Silver Girl*).

A documentary ethos presides over this sight of downtown Manhattan, with its taste for multiplicity and an eye to the aesthetics of "spontaneous" growth. Holding a magnifying glass, armchair spectators could peruse at length the multitude of billboards and the rear of Newspaper Row, with its continuous curtain of brick walls interspersed with painted signs. Minute details of the urban text were carefully recorded by the large-format camera generally used by professional photographers. The significance of this visual regime for the city dweller or the tourist is suggested by a remark found in a 1917 commercial guide of New York, in which the reader was directed to gaze upon a small statue far away in the distance, indicating the German Herold Building on North William Street: "The Brooklyn Bridge here interrupts the succession of Newspaper Row, but we may see beyond it the *German Herold*, with the herald

44. Founded in the late 1880s by William A. Livingstone, Jr., and Edwin H. Husher as the Detroit Photographic Company, the firm was joined in 1898 by William Henry Jackson: see Jim Hughes, *The Birth of a Century: Early Color Photographs of America* (London and New York: Tauris Parke Books, 1994), p. 9.

sounding his trumpet on the roof."[45] None of the illustrations included in the guide showed the actual scene described in the text, but it is not unlikely that the anonymous writer based his observations on a photograph similar to the one sold by the Detroit Publishing Company ten years earlier. But perhaps more important, with its elevated vantage point, its embracing view, and its impressive evenness of detail, the picture offered the spectator a wealth of information coupled with a sense of the city's geography that no guide could provide with such economy of means.

At around the same time, other photographers began to develop a more interpretive approach toward the verbiage of advertising. Several images made by the firm of George G. Bain in the mid-1910s, for instance, appear to foreshadow the appreciation for billboards and painted signs of Berenice Abbott's project, *Changing New York*, two decades later.[46] Occasionally, even plain documentary photographs, through the simple act of selecting, framing, and juxtaposing the signs of the city, can show a certain awareness of photography's potential to deconstruct the discourse of commercialism. Bain's 1908 records of the George Dixon Memorial Fountain on the corner of Thomson and Broome streets are a case in point (fig. 593). Erected to commemorate the African-American boxing champion George Dixon, who died prematurely in 1908 at the age of 37, the fountain had one side designed for horses and the other for the public.[47] The two photographs in the Bain Collection at the Library of Congress depicted the fountain against different backgrounds; in the view showing the horse fountain, the photogra-

45. *New York: The Metropolis of the Western World* (New York: Foster and Reynolds Co., 1917), p. 59.

46. I am thinking of photographs like *Moving Hotel DeGink* (Library of Congress, LOT 7171) and *Bowery: Entrance to 5-cent Restaurant* (LC-B22-306-4), both from the mid-1910s, which foreshadow Berenice Abbott's treatment of similar themes two decades later. For an overview, see Michael Carlebach, *Bain's New York: The City in News Pictures 1900–1925* (New York: Dover Publications, 2011).

47. Mike Glenn, "George Dixon: World Bantamweight and Featherweight Champion," in *The First Black Boxing Champions: Essays on Fighters of the 1800s to the 1920s*, edited by Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), p. 58.

pher turned the camera slightly to the right to include a large weathered poster of a novel, *Jack Sheppard, the Bandit King*, in which the protagonist appeared in action, riding a horse and shooting a gun as he kidnapped a young woman.[48] Such harmless visual puns did not affect the power of street advertising, but they suggest that photographers of the early 1900s had begun to perceive the potential of their medium to reconfigure the rhetorics of commercial culture within the larger system of urban signs.

Meanwhile, in the most advanced photographic circles the commodification of New York's visual space was condemned without excuse as a sign of America's decline. Writing in *Camera Work* in 1903, art critic Sadakichi Hartmann sang the rarified beauty of the metropolis in the suspended moment of the sunset, suddenly spoiled by the acid glare of neon lights:

> And as the night descends, catching a last glimpse of the bridge glinting like a fairy tiara above the waters of the East River, you feel that the City of the Sea has put on her diamonds – and then you notice the words "Uneeda Cracker."
>
> As yet everything is saturated with the pernicious habit of industry, yelling and writhing before the juggernaut-car of commerce.[49]

In the photographs of Stieglitz and Coburn – the most advanced urban photographers in the pre-World War I period – the words of the city were practically erased, in

48. Olive Harper [pseud.], *Jack Sheppard, the Bandit King* (New York: J. S. Ogilvie Publishing Co., 1908). For the play on which the novel was based, see *The Stage Year Book*, edited by L. Carson (London: Carson & Comerford, Ltd, 1909), p. 235.

49. Sidney Allan [Sadakichi Hartmann], "The 'Flat-Iron' Building: An Esthetical Dissertation," *Camera Work*, No. 4 (October 1903), pp. 36–40 (quotation p. 39), reprinted in *Sadakichi Hartmann: Critical Modernist*, edited by Jane Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 145.

keeping with Hartmann's image of New York as an organic body rooted in the harmony of nature, its cycles, its light, its atmospheric elements.[50]

It was only with the early work of Paul Strand that billboards and signs became a viable subject for a photographer of the Stieglitz circle. Strand's inclusion of the word in the realm of "pure" visuality marked an important innovation in the language of the medium. In a photograph like *Blind*, 1916 – one of the few images that Evans acknowledged among his lasting influences – the sign carried by the elderly woman functioned as an internal caption that underscored the straightforward nature of the photographic record; at the same time, it exposed the conceptual issue of the photographer's (and by extension the viewer's) status as a voyeur. More frequently, however, Strand experimented with the fragmented words of the modern city, incorporating bits of movie posters and commercial signs in his geometrical studies of urban space. In *Hudson River Pier*, c. 1914, as in *From the Viaduct* (fig. 130) and the sandwich man of *Untitled* (fig. 577), both from 1916, these fragments of urban narrative composed a disjointed microcosm, while at the same time evoking a complex world beyond the limited frame of the photograph. This is particularly evident in *Untitled* and *From the Viaduct* (two photographs that Evans undoubtedly saw in *Camera Work* together with *Blind*), which Strand placed at a pivotal position exactly in the middle of the sequence. In both cases the typography of urban signs, reproduced almost frontally but truncated at the margins, established a tension between the surface of the city and the surface of the artwork, according to the principles of Cubist painting and in tune with the formal solutions later adopted by Precisionist artists of the 1920s. Splintered or compressed among these declaratory signs – "30 W. 18TH ST. – THE PRICE," "GARAGE," "CHARLES F[...] – JULIA SA[...]" – was a disorienting urban space that challenged traditional notions of size, distance, and perspectival depth.

50. Two exceptions among Stieglitz's masterworks are worth mentioning: a street sign of "The Waldorf," hardly legible in the snowstorm of *Winter, Fifth Avenue* and the "Harlem" sign in *The Terminal*, both from 1893.

The importance of the visual innovations devised by Strand in the pre-zoning era can be gauged from the number of photographers who applied similar strategies to the new urbanscape of 1920s New York, when modern skyscrapers and the ubiquitous text advertising formed the basis of daily life. If Evans was not fully aware of Strand's seminal experiments with urban space when he took up his own in 1928, he probably began studying them in depth the following year, when he became acquainted with Ralph Steiner, an admirer of Strand's work and later his personal friend.[51] After studying briefly at the Clarence White School of Photography in 1922, Steiner had started a professional career as a staff photographer for *The Woman's Home Companion* and *The Delineator*.[52] In the meantime, he developed an original investigation of New York's streetscapes, focusing mainly on architecture and commercial signs, very much in tune with Strand's New York photographs of 1915–1916.

In the previous chapters we have discussed Steiner's role in the organization of the Machine-Age Exposition of 1927 and the influence on Evans's work of his so-called "Cubist" photographs of skyscrapers, which were published twice in *Vanity Fair* in 1928. But it was also his ironic view of advertising that affected the young Evans, especially through iconic photographs such as *Always Camels*, 1922 (fig. 466), *Lollipop*, 1924 (fig. 331), and *One Talking Picture*, 1929 (fig. 594). Less rigorous than Strand in formal terms, Steiner was attracted by the surreal theatricality of metropolitan space, a stage where people seemed to move aimlessly under the rhetorical slogans of advertising and the vacuous characters of the movies. From Steiner, Evans learned the pros and cons of the visual pun, a strategy that he practiced with restraint but that was going to become almost unavoidable during the Depression, as in his *Houses and Billboards in Atlanta*, 1936. But Steiner was also among the first to cast a sympathetic eye on the

51. Ralph Steiner, *A Point of View* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), pp. 10–11.

52. Carol J. Payne, *Interactions of Photography and the Mass Media, 1920–1941: The Early Career of Ralph Steiner*, PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1999, pp. 61–129.

neat typography of the NEHI signs that he discovered in 1929 during a residency at the Yaddo artists' colony in Saratoga Springs – a subject matter that Evans photographed extensively in the mid-1930s and that played a major role in the visual economy of *American Photographs*.[53]

As with the skyscraper, architectural and photographic books are important tools for gauging the impact of advertising on the urban discourse of the 1920s. Evans was probably initiated into this transatlantic debate by Paul Grotz, the young German architect who had first encouraged his stint on top of the Chanin Building in 1929 and who also photographed New York for a brief period. From Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, as we have seen, Evans probably derived some key ideas about the significance of the skyscraper in the machine age. The book did not address the connection of architecture with advertising. In the second (1924) edition, however, Le Corbusier included a photograph on this topic by Swiss architect Ellow H. Hostache, placed at the beginning of a chapter on mass-production housing (fig. 450).[54] Probably taken in Paris in 1924, the photograph showed gigantic Ford and Citroën billboards on a faux façade concealing a historical building.[55] Although it expressed vividly the contrast between classical architecture and ephemeral advertising, solidity and surface, immobility and dynamism, the picture did not seem to convey a specific symbolism, except as a reminder of the issues of technology and classical architecture discussed in the previous

53. Bonnie Brennen, "Billboards of the Dream: Walker Evans on 1930s U.S. Advertising," in *In the Company of Media: Cultural Constructions of Communication, 1920s–1930s*, edited by Hanno Hardt (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 116–28.

54. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: G. Crès, 1924), trans. Frederick Etchells, *Toward a New Architecture* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1927), p. 209.

55. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, edited by Jean-Louis Cohen, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), p. 326. I suggest a later date than the one indicated by Cohen ("circa 1921") based on the fact that the Ford and the Citroën billboards shown in the photograph were both launched in 1924. See Fabien Sabatès, *…Et vint la Ford T. La voiture universelle* (Paris: Massin, 1994), p. 166 and Nathalie Gibert-Joly, *Jean Bruller, Nathan et Citroën*, http://vercorsecrivain.pagesperso-orange.fr/Jean Bruller_Nathan_Citroen.html (accessed March 7, 2014).

chapters.[56] The implicit meaning of this illustration can be gleaned from an important article on the "Formation of a modern optics," written by Ozenfant and Jeanneret in 1924, which opened with two photographic illustrations of a modern car and of the electric signs of Times Square.[57] Cars and neon lights, accelerated speed and aggressive colors, the whole cacophony of images of the city, they explained, were the inescapable elements that shaped the psyche of modern civilization. Standing in a dialectical relationship with this overload of stimuli, however, was the inherent geometrical principle of the city and of the human spirit. The wrote:

> Framing this spectacle of accelerated speed are stores lined up [on the street] one after another, forcing on us their countless objects of modern industry, all marked by the imperative precision that fatally stems from the machine age.[58]

The visual regime of modernity – its "modern optics," according to Ozenfant and Jeanneret – resulted from this need to control the excessive impulse of the city with an eye that is "pointed, trained, alert, and penetrating."[59] By extension, we can see a similar dialectics of geometry and flux in Evans's parallel exploration of New York's skyscrapers and advertising.

Among the German books that Grotz probably made available to Evans in the late 1920s, László Moholy-Nagy's *Von Material zu Architektur* deserves particular attention. Published in 1929 as a primer in the series of the *Bauhausbücher* and immediately

56. Tag Gronberg has interpreted this photograph as a direct illustration of Le Corbusier's ideas on the standardization of production (of cars as of housing) in *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 122–23.

57. Ozenfant and Jeanneret, "Formation de l'optique moderne," *L'Esprit nouveau*, Vol. 5, No. 21 (March 1924), n.p., reprinted in Ibid., *La peinture moderne* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925), pp. 61–70.

58. Ibid., p. 65.

59. Ibid., p. 69.

translated into English as *The New Vision*, the book included a substantial discussion of neon advertising in a section devoted to light and the origins of kinetic sculpture. Although Moholy-Nagy, contrary to Le Corbusier, berated the phantasmagoria of advertising as a technological innovation fostered by the demands of industry and as "a blind alley for the creative artist," he acknowledged its revolutionary impact on the psychology of modern urban space and employed different types of photographs to analyze it.[60] In the American edition of the book, photographs of the new Paramount Building and of lanterns capable of projecting gigantic signs on the façades of tall buildings were followed by a time exposure of Times Square, in which intermittent neon signs were shown simultaneously to form a visual tapestry of incomprehensible words: "SONOR," "RIT," "CHALMERS UNDERWEAR MAKERS OF Porosknit / Inrox & Knico." This photographic "compression of several scenes at night in the city," Moholy-Nagy wrote, allowed the viewer to perceive the full "interpenetration of time and space" normally experienced at the unconscious level (fig. 451).[61] The section ended with a second time exposure, in which neon signs, street lights, and the tracks of automobile headlights formed "the new script of the metropolis."[62] Within the scheme of a progression "from material to architecture" announced by the book's title, photographs were used as scientific tools to reveal the deeper structures of visual perception.

Advertising also played an important role in Erich Mendelsohn's intepretation of American urbanism. In *Amerika*, the theme was first introduced by night photographs of the Capitol Theatre on Times Square and of H. Craig Severance and W. Van Alen's Commodore Criterion Building on Madison Square.[63] But it was in a chapter

60. Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, p. 139.

61. Ibid., p. 141.

62. For the original source of this particular image, see the Czech magazine *Pestrý týden* (Colorful week), No. 33 (August 17, 1927), p. 9.

63. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. 23, 77. Although the actual buildings were barely recognizable owing to the glares of artificial light, both photographs, taken by Knud Lonberg-Holm in 1923, were time exposures similar to Moholy-Nagy's night views. The latter was reproduced in Moholy-Nagy's script,

entitled "The Grotesque" that New York's neon signs figured prominently, with views of Broadway by night and by day and three-story billboards plastering the corner of Seventh Avenue across from Pennsylvania Station (fig. 453). The chapter also included various scenes of unregulated street advertising taken in Detroit.[64] Mendelsohn did not develop a full theory of urban advertising, but he saw the proliferation of signs as a distinctive mark of the American city. In his captions, he made a distinction between the "imaginative beauty" of the Times Square nightscape and the "unbridled, wild [...] grandiose tomfoolery" of billboards obstructing the view of preexisting buildings and interfering with the rational order of the city plan.[65] It was in his following book, *Russland Europa Amerika*, published in 1928, that Mendelsohn discussed specific architectural issues concerning the advertising function of the building's façade. Speaking of a photograph (taken by Karweik) of a 19th-century warehouse on South Street with fire escapes and the traditional painted signs running across the façade (fig. 270), he traced the origins of a disjunction between surface and structure – "the interrelation of art forms and real needs" – in the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution.[66] The same concept was repeated later in the book in a discussion of Joseph Urban and Thomas Lamb's Ziegfield Theatre on Sixth Avenue at 54th Street, built in 1927:

> Americans treat advertising and fire escapes as annoying and intractable ingredients. They avoid placing them on the façade, preferring the rear of the building or lateral streets. Or they use them so as to create an in-

Dynamik der Gross-stadt, in *Malerei Fotografie Film* (München: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927, reprint Mainz and Berlin: Florian Kupfenberg Verlag, 1967), p. 127.

64. Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, pp. 131, 133, 159 and 157, 161, 163, respectively.

65. Ibid., p. 132.

66. Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland Europa Amerika: Ein architektonischer Querschnitt* (Berlin: Rudolph Mosse, 1929), p. 15. The photograph shows the headquarters of Babino & Gatto, a paper supply company located at 177 South Street, just north of Roosevelt Street (*Lockwood's Directory of the Paper and Allied Trades*, 1930, p. 512).

> tentional but fundamentally helpless contrast with architecture, as in the case of this theatre.[67]

Mendelsohn clarified this point by contrasting a photograph of the Ziegfield Theatre with a recent example of Russian architecture. In Alexey Shchusev's entry to the 1925 competition for the Central Telegraph Building (Tass) building in Moscow, he claimed, non-structural elements like commercial signs and advertising were accepted as an integral part of modern life, to the extent that they became the pivotal element around which the entire project revolved.[68] Like Le Corbusier, Mendelsohn interpreted the contradiction between buildings and advertising as a historical condition of the machine age, and noted that it was the task of the modern architect to achieve a synthesis.

Although it is difficult to determine to what extent Evans absorbed the transatlantic debate on urban advertising that I have tried to summarize here, it is important to consider this background of images and ideas when we set out to decode his protracted interest in this theme. In the following section I will analyze in depth Evans's studies on commercial signage and will try to single out the visual and conceptual strategies that he developed to incorporate the urban text in his larger project on New York. For these reasons, this section is organized thematically rather than chronologically, moving from photographs that confront head-on the assertiveness of capitalism to studies that attempt to destructure its language, ending with a discussion of shop windows and the display of goods – or their simulacra – that Le Corbusier saw as a distinctive expression of "modern optics."

67. Ibidem, p. 132.

68. The architect's name was not listed in the book. See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 232.

5.3 Visualizing the urban text

In the wake of the fire that destroyed downtown Manhattan in December 1835, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short piece in the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge,* suggesting that "the mere shadowy image of a building, on the frail material of paper, which might be annihilated in an instant, is likely to have a longer term of existence than the piled brick and mortar of the building."[69] Illustrated by a sketch of Coffee House Slip (at the foot of Wall Street), the article praised printed records as invaluable tools for the future history of the metropolis, where stately buildings were constantly torn down "to make room for modern improvements." Hawthorne went on to give his own account of New York Harbor, describing the variety of human types, the sounds and smells of the busy wharves, and the signs of city life. Amidst the picturesque urbanscape of ships, vessels, wagons, and trucks, he also registered the words of the city, the bits of narration inscribed in, and evoked by, inanimate things: packet boats "with their places of destination announced in huge letters on their shrouds," "barrels of flours stamped with different brands," and even a cannon, "its gaping mouth at the stranger, as if to utter tales of pirates in the West Indies or of Malays in the East." The semiotics of Hawthorne's essay operated on two registers: while he acknowledged that sketches, drawings, lithographs and, shortly thereafter, photographs, could be used as accurate records of the city's buildings, he implied that only the imaginative writer had the possibility of interpreting the signs of larger narratives with "the minuteness of a traveller to far distant lands."

As Hawthorne had anticipated, when Evans began to photograph the same area from the Brooklyn Bridge, almost a century later, the city had changed dramatically. The photographs that he took over several weeks at the end of 1928 lined up all the

69. [Nathaniel Hawthorne,] "Coffee House Slip," *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (April 1836), pp. 345–46, quoted in Henkin, *City Reading*, p. 27.

major skyscrapers of the new skyline: the Singer Building, the Equitable Building, the Bankers Trust Company Building, and the iron skeleton of the 111 John Street Building rapidly progressing in the foreground (figs. 15–23). These views also recorded an array of commercial signs crowning the tenements and warehouses near South Street, in full sight of the daily commuters riding or walking the bridge. Signs painted on brick buildings in a typical 19th-century fashion advertised companies such as "ZIBELL BUILDING" or "Here in this building / BERNARD & HELLER / 275 Water Street." Some of these messages had remained unchanged for decades, as in the case of a sign advertising the Weck Cutlery. The company owner, Edward Weck, had stated in 1919 that

> this sign has been maintained in the same spot and with exactly the same reading matter for over twelve years. It has become part of the scenery, and although it does not refer to any special goods we have to sell but simply advertises the name and the business, I believe that it has helped very much to familiarize the hundreds of thousands travelling on the bridge with the name "Weck." I believe this to be good advertising, and I will maintain that sign there as long as I possibly can.[70]

New advertisements were replaced at a much faster pace. During the weeks in which the frame of the 111 John Street Building rose to completion, at least three subsequent billboards could be seen on top of a Dover Street tenement, within yards from the bridge's promenade. Evans must have been aware of the tongue-in-cheek irony created by the giant signs evoking "PARIS" or proclaiming "PERFECTION" right underneath the new skyscrapers of the Financial District.[71]

70. Edward Weck, "How the Retail Cutler May Gain Local Prominence by Educating the Buyer," *The American Cutler*, No. 119 (May 1919), pp. 11–14, quotation p. 14.

71. Less obvious, but equally significant for the economy of late-1920s New York, was the comparative value of Davega, Inc. – a chain store also advertised by the billboard – which capitalized $3.1

Evans occasionally illustrated the role of large billboards in shaping New York's public space, possibly in relationship with the work of Percy Loomis Sperr (figs. 193, 194). The involuntary contrast between the painted signs of manufacturing or commercial companies and the fictional narratives of the entertainment industry can be seen in a 1934 photograph taken on 56th Street and 11th Avenue (fig. 481). Also taken from an elevated vantage point, it showed a dilapidated building, and an empty lot boarded up with theatrical and movie posters, including George White's revue *Scandals* and *Viva Villa*, a film on the Mexican revolutionary general Pancho Villa. In the background, right above the movie poster, loomed the sign of Sheffield Farms Co., one of America's largest dairy companies; in the foreground, the company's name could be seen again on the roof of a milk van.[72]

General views of this kind are rather exceptional in Evans's early work. Considering the relatively low quality of the negative, it seems unlikely that it was taken for professional reasons, although its illustrative tone is reminiscent of technical photographs published in early 1900s advertising manuals. An interesting example is a view published in a 1909 pamphlet of the International Correspondence Schools: "photographed from an elevation in order to show the unsightly mass that the board hides from view. This comparison is a good answer to the critics of poster and painted-sign advertising" (fig. 480).[73]

Evans's view provides a visual record of the effects of the Depression on New York's urbanscape, but considering his ironic attitude it is not unlikely that it also carried a metaphorical resonance. Sheffield Farms was one of the three major companies

million in retail sales in 1926, against the total investment of the 111 John Street Building, stated at $3.5 million before construction began in 1928. See *Manual of Chain Store Companies* (New York: Benj. Parvin Moore and Associates, 1927), p. 25; "Building Plans Filed," *New York Times*, July 17, 1928, p. 37.

72. *Sheffield Farms Milk Plant,* Historic American Engineering Record Report No. NY-267, 1991.

73. I.C.S. Reference Library, Sect. 32, *Outdoor Advertising* (Scranton, N.Y.: International Textbook Company, 1909), p. 47.

controlling the city's dairy market; in 1933, after milk prices had begun to sink due to overproduction, causing diminishing returns for small farmers and dealers, a report of the Pitcher Committee stated that "unfair and distinctive trade practices are now being carried on in the distribution of milk."[74] Later that year, major strikes in upstate New York and Wisconsin ensued, leading to violence and destruction.[75] By shortcircuiting the *Viva Villa* and Sheffield Farms signs in a scene of ruin and decay, Evans may have hinted at the political and social conflicts at the root of the Depression.

In general, Evans's approach to commercial signs was more selective. Between 1928 and 1931 he often experimented with the basic symbols of urban capitalism, such as the giant electric signs of corporate firms placed on the roofs of modern skyscrapers. Two notable examples discussed in the previous chapters are the U.S. Rubber Building and the Manufacturers Trust Company Building, both photographed as a counterpoint to the Maine Memorial Monument on Columbus Circle (figs. 506, 510). Photographs of this type radicalized the iconography of previous artworks commenting on the impact of new signs of capitalist arrogance, such as Arnold Rönnebeck's *Columbus Circle, New York*, c. 1926 (fig. 511). Evans further developed his approach in 1930–1931, when he photographed the U.S. Rubber sign from the top of the Fisk Rubber Co. Building, 250 West 57th Street (fig. 502). Probably made on commission for the Philadelphia advertising company of N. W. Ayer & Son, the view collapsed the space between the gigantic signs into a patchwork of illegible ciphers, except for an ambiguous "U.S." sign at the center of the composition.[76] The result of this deconstructive approach can be better gauged by comparing Evans's interpretations of the U.S. Rubber sign with standard

74. *Report of the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Milk Industry* (Albany: J. B. Lyons, 1933).

75. Wilbur G. Lewis, "Milk Surplus Crux of Dairymen War," *New York Times*, August 13, 1933, p. B1.

76. See Eklund, "Exile's Return" p. 36. In 1927, N. W. Ayer & Son had commissioned Sheeler's famous series on the River Rouge Plant.

photographs of the time made to celebrate the "electric sublime" of Central Park South (fig. 505).[77]

A specific character of advertising that Evans explored for many years was the reverberation of words and slogans on the walls of the city. In *License Photo Studio*, 1934, taken on Worth Street, the word "PHOTOS" is repeated five times (comparison with a Sperr view of the same period reveals Evans's ability to create stringent visual statements out of jumbled urban situations) (figs. 227, 228). Placed at the beginning of *American Photographs*, this photograph recorded sympathetically two parallel aspects of vernacular culture – one related to architecture, the other to painted signs – that could also be seen in Precisionist paintings of about the same time, such as Demuth's *Buildings, Lancaster*, 1930 (fig. 229). Other aspects were also registered by Evans's large-format camera; as Ian Jeffrey has noted, chalk drawings can be read on the lower part of the façade: "TOOTSIE LOVE FINA" and "COME UP AND SEE ME SOMETIME," the latter a 1933 tune that Lillian Roth sung in *Take a Chance* and that Mae West made popular the following year in *She Done Him Wrong*.[78]

Evans's early work, however, shows a more acerbic approach to commercial culture. Repetition of advertising slogans plays an important part in a photograph taken underneath the 42nd Street station of the Sixth Avenue line in 1929, showing an African-American woman eyeing the camera from under a large fur collar (fig. 405). That Evans considered this snapshot among his best initial works is proved by fact that he repeatedly included it in early exhibitions and publications, beginning with a 1930 portfolio in *Hound & Horn*. Initially captioned *Negress, Sixth Avenue*, in 1938 it was reproduced in *American Photographs* as part of a subseries on African-American culture, together

77. David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), pp. 143 ff.

78. Ian Jeffrey, "Image and Dream: The Photography of Walker Evans and Paul Strand," *Artscribe*, No. 7 (July 1977), pp. 30–35. Mae West was probably the first to use the line in the 1928 play *Diamond Lil*, and again in the 1934 movie *I'm No Angel*, based on the play.

with the street portrait of an elegantly dressed man in Havana and two pictures of Southern homes.[79] The importance of the racial issue has partially obscured a second theme, this time related to advertising, suggested by the "ROYAL BAKING POWDER / ABSOLUTELY PURE" sign repeated on the the staircase to the right, interrupted only by the mysterious figure (perhaps a policeman) discending in the opposite direction. The same commercial mantra was the subject of another photograph (probably taken on a different day) in which Evans experimented with the geometrical shapes of the steps and the cast shadows cutting obliquely across the scene (fig. 407).[80]

Other photographers explored the same visual theme. An almost identical photograph was taken by Berenice Abbott, then Evans's friend and supporter, sometime between 1929 and 1930 (fig. 409); a similar situation was pictured in Umbo's *Stairs II*, taken in Germany during the same period (fig. 408). Abbott's version, however, lacked the modernist precision of Evans's cast shadows, adding instead an element of surrealistic narrative with the blurred, headless man seen from the back, a vanishing presence *vis-à-vis* the static facticity of the metal signs; in Umbo's snapshot, on the contrary, the imperatives of advertising were diluted by the casualness of the middle-class citizens and the relieved dynamism of the scene.

Evans's geometrical staircase, like many of his skyscraper photographs, belies the ambitious attempt to integrate into a simple act of looking the description of an everyday place, a bodily perception of space, and the problematic pleasure of machine-age order – a program that he shared with Precisionist works like Charles Sheeler's *Stairway to the Studio*, 1924 (fig. 410). Even more ambitiously, by stepping back and showing

79. Evans, *American Photographs*, pls. I/18–21. This portrait was probably Evans's most published photograph of his early period: it was reproduced in *Hound & Horn*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October-December 1930), following p. 42; *Der Querschnitt*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (August 1932), following p. 580; *America As Americans See It*, edited by Fred J. Ringel (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), frontispiece (together with a photograph by Paul Grotz).

80. The same theme is the subject of two negatives dating from the same period with a series of Milnesia signs (WEA 1994.253.46.1-.2).

the numbing reiterations of consumer culture within the larger context of 42nd Street, Evans addressed the nexus between citizenship and persuasion that advertising theory usually translated in terms of "habit" and "repetition value." Looming behind the Royal Baking Powder signs was the crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon, who taught American ad men that "a repeated statement becomes embedded in the depths of our subconscious selves, in which the motives of our actions are forged."[81]

In late-1920s New York, a significant portion of outdoor advertising was related to theatrical productions and the movies. It was especially from Ralph Steiner that Evans learned the strategy of appropriating the words of fictional narratives to make sardonic comments on the urban environment and modern civilization. In 1922, years before the codification of the genre, Steiner had photographed a Camel advertisement on 47th Street, with a the gigantic bust of a smiling smoker and a peremptory "Always" tagline hovering above a lilliputian world of small shops and passersby (fig. 466).[82] Steiner also photographed *Lollipop*, a litany of posters of the 1924 musical starring Ada May Weeks (fig. 331); and *One Talking Picture*, 1929, showing the protagonists of Michael Curtiz's *Noah's Ark* staring with awe at an urban wasteland of litter and trash, flanked by posters of R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (fig. 594).

Evans toyed with similar ideas, first timidly – as in a 1930 photograph of a wooden staircase with a movie poster of *This Mad World* (fig. 595) – and then boldly – as in *Truck and Sign*, showing a large electric sign with the word "DAMAGED" being unloaded from a truck by three workers (fig. 280).[83] Like Steiner's *One Talking Picture*, Evans's

81. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), pp- 126–27. For examples of Le Bon's theory applied to advertising, see Arthur Acheson, *Trade-Mark Advertising as an Investment* (New York: The New York Evening Post, 1917), pp. 28-30 and *Outdoor Advertising – The Modern Marketing Force*, p. 48.

82. For Steiner's sense of humor, see Carol J. Payne, *Interactions of Photography and the Mass Media, 1920–1941: The Early Career of Ralph Steiner* (PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1999), pp. 181 ff.

83. *This Mad World*, directed by William de Mille, with Kay Johnson, Basil Rathbone, was a World War I spy story and romantic melodrama adapted from a French play, *Terre inhumaine*.

snapshot captured the inconsistency between the reassuring narratives of film and the decay of the Depression, but it did so with an added twist of irony, considering that the sign probably referred to *Not Damaged*, a romantic comedy shown at the Globe in June 1930, whose culminating act was the musical number *Nothing's Gonna Hold Us Down*.[84] Specifically, *Truck and Sign* voiced Evans's skepticism toward New York City: published in *Creative Art* as the opening picture of a portfolio titled "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," it was meant

> to convey in symbolism – as it were, to typify – the blended babel of such a modern city's life, with a directness which would be beyond the possibility of a normal "heading," and in a manner as nearly appropriate to the subject-matter as a typographical expression can be.[85]

"This city," Evans wrote to Skolle in 1932, "is offering a spectacle of disintegration such as has never been equalled. The first thing I want to impress upon your ever acute consciousness is Don't come to America."[86] Evans translated this sense of ruinous imprisonment in the second photograph of the portfolio, *Broadway Composition*, in fact a composite picture of neon signs pictured at night in Times Square, revolving around the theatre marquee for *The Big House* (figs. 448, 449). Directed by George W. Hill and shown at the Astor Theatre in June 1930, *The Big House* was not a film about mansions or skyscrapers, but a story about prison life, addressing specifically (according to film historian Mike Nellis) "the official ineptitude which allows reformed men to stay in prison, old cons to corrupt younger ones, and the prison population in general to have

84. "Enjoyable Film Farce," *New York Times*, June 9, 1930, p. 26; "'Not Damaged' Is Film Production at RKO Orpheum," *The Daily Illini*, October 9, 1930, p. 10.

85. "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1930), pp. 453–54.

86. Letter, Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, May 19, 1932 (WEA, #35).

so much time on their hands that making each other's lives miserable is the cons' only pastime."[87] The dystopian subtext of *Broadway Composition* may have been lost to the ad men of N. W. Ayer & Son, who had first commissioned the picture as part of series on New York's commercial signs and who included it in the Third Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Photography, where it was safely titled *Mazda Lane*.[88] But Lincoln Kirstein, Evans's friend and mentor, did not fail to grasp its satirical mood, recording in his diary a nightly walk in Times Square, where the young photographer swiftly stopped to catch the "lurid metaphor in the bright lights."[89]

The origins of this iconography can be traced back to the late 19th century. Moonlight city views (real or contrived) had become a genre beginning in the 1860s, but with the advent of electric light photographers played a key role in the popularization of a new technological picturesque.[90] In 1897, *Scribner's* magazine published an article on night photography illustrated by Alfred Stieglitz, celebrating the beauty of "the shiny pavements, the dully glowing lamps, and the ever-passing gleams and flashes that come from street-cars and the rumbling cabs."[91] Léon Gimpel had been the first to systematically photograph traffic signals and night advertisements in Paris, using autochromes to record the mechanical drawings of artificial light.[92] Electric

87. Mike Nellis, "Notes on the American Prison Film," in *The Prison Film*, edited by Mike Nellis and Christopher Hale (London: Radical Alternatives to Prison, 1982), p. 15, quoted in David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2004), p. 82.

88. WEA 1994.250.87 (5), published in *Boston Herald*, June 14, 1931. The same photograph was also published on the cover of *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (June 24, 1931).

89. Lincoln Kirstein, diary, n.d., p. 124 (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), quoted in Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 130.

90. Night painters such as Aleksander Gierymski and Ludwik de Laveaux had begun to depict the artificial nightscape of Paris in the early 1890s. See Rowland Strong, "The Colour of Paris," *Country Life*, Vol. 25, No. 626 (January 2, 1909), pp. 26–28.

91. James B. Carrington, "Unusual Uses of Photography, II – Night Photography," *Scribner's Magazine*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (November 1897), pp. 626–28.

92. Thierry Gervais, Dominique de Font-Réaulx, *Léon Gimpel (1873–1948). Les audaces d'un pho-*

companies, especially with the advent of the modern skyscraper, were also keen on exploiting the picturesque beauty of neon signs to advertise their products (fig. 505).[93] Similar depictions of modern complexity were rooted in the formal experiments of Futurist and Dadaist artists, such as George Grosz's *Memory of New York*, 1914–1915 (fig. 454). By the late 1920s, however, modernist and avant-garde languages had been subsumed into the more conventional agenda of advertising (fig. 455).[94] While Erich Mendelsohn lamented the "grotesque" disorder of Times Square at night, professional and art photographers as well continued to experiment with this motif, using time exposures and montage to convey the kaleidoscopic effect of flashing electrical signs, as in Thurman Rotan's *New York Montage*, 1928 and Man Ray's *Electricité – La ville*, 1931 (figs. 456, 457).

The montage of *Broadway Composition* was an exception, since Evans always preferred to work by day and in a straightforward style. The electric signs of the Astor Theatre on Times Square are also the subject of *Outdoor Advertisements*, 1929, with the gigantic marquee for the famous MGM's *Hollywood Revue* and a Lucky Strike sign in the background (fig. 446). Using the same strategies of his skyscraper photographs, Evans adopted a worm's-eye perspective to convey the disproportionate scale of New York's urbanscape. As in *New York in the Making* (fig. 396), the tiny workers standing on the suspended platform and climbing the frame behind the sign look like incongruous

tographe (Paris: Musée d'Orsay and Milan: 5 Continents, 2008); Ariane Coulondre, Maurice Fréchuret, Michel Gauthier *et al.*, *Disques et sémaphores: Le langage du signal chez Léger et ses contemporains* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2010).

93. Compare, for example, the pre- and post-1929 annual reports of the Consolidated gas Company of New York, as well as *Architecture of the Night* (Schenectady, N.Y.: General Electric Company, 1930). For an overview, Mary N. Woods, "Photography of the Night: Skyscraper Nocturne and Skyscraper Noir in New York," in *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building*, edited by Dietrich Neumann and Kermit Swiler Champa (Munich and New York: Prestel, 2002), pp. 68–77.

94. See Sally Stein, "'Good Fences Make Good Neighbors.' American Resistance to to Photomontage Between the Wars," in *Montage and Modern Life: 1919–1942*, edited by Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 128–89.

characters of a child's drawing or a surreal painting. It is not altogether clear, from the photograph, whether they are installing or unmounting the huge sign; even more than in the night view, the missing "H" and the mishmash of words conveyed the idea of a city reduced to pure veneer. Within a year, similar signs could be found not only in Times Square but also along every major suburban road: as the *Architectural Forum* admonished in 1930, "as we speed along endless by-pass roads in six-cylinder saloons, we shall be able to pay a second reverence to our papier-mâché deities" (fig. 447).[95]

Following along this line, Evans found similar scenes of verbal congestion in downtown New York, as in a photograph of a sporting goods store taken in Nassau Street with the x-shaped figure of a man suspended on a ladder in a disarray of commercial signs (fig. 129). What we begin to see here is an extrusion of words and shapes in three-dimensional space, reminiscent of Paul Strand's first experiments in New York and of post-Cubist paintings of the 1920s (fig. 130). Interestingly, comparison with a documentary photograph taken few months before Evans's study shows that a certain degree of simplification was being imposed on the redundancy of suspended signs (fig. 128). At the same time, even exclusive financial companies were beginning to accept photographs of "all kinds of angles, snapped from all sorts of positions" as indexes of dynamism and vibrancy: in 1929, the new Plaza Trust Company on Fifth Avenue launched an advertising campaign based on images similar to Evans's illustration of urban chaos, as "an appropriate method of impressing its modernistic atmosphere upon its prospective depositors" (fig. 131).[96]

In addition to Times Square, it was in Coney Island that Evans found the raw material for his visual critique of the city's dematerialization. The Promenade was New

95. "Wayside Gods. Past, Present & Future," *The Architectural Review*, Vol. 68, No. 407 (October 1930), pp. 150–51.

96. BBDO (Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn Advertising Agency), New York, "All kinds of angles, snapped from all sorts of positions…," *Advertising & Selling*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (July 10, 1929), p. 26. See also "Plaza Trust Company Opens for Business," *Bankers Magazine*, Vol. 118, No. 1 (January 1929), pp. 153 ff.

York's theatrical set *par excellence*, and over the year Evans photographed many aspects of popular culture, including advertising, cheap amusements, food stands, Luna Park, the Wonder Wheel, sideshow barkers, fortune tellers, burlesque shows, and the crowds of bathers on the beach. Under the Chiricoesque Colgate's clock of the boardwalk at 2 p.m. sharp, painted women advertising soap and sunburn lotions vied for the attention of young men walking on the boardwalk (fig. 633). Occasionally, his compositional strategies may seem to rehash the synthetic attitude of more conventional pictorial works, such as Louis Lozowick's *Coney Island*, 1925 (figs. 640, 641). But in general he seemed more interested in the type of "disintegration" discussed by Eugène Jolas in "The Revolution of the Word," as in the ironic "LUNA / dick's" crasis of a Luna Park sign with a Nedick's ad (fig. 634).

Coney Island was also a fitting place to experiment with the appropriation of images, especially those supplied by popular culture. A sequence of three negatives in the Walker Evans Archive allows us to understand how he approached a painted sign in the Bronx, probably indicating a swimming area nearby (figs. 547–548).[97] As in many photographs from this early period, Evans seemed interested in the culture of the "new woman" expressed by clothing and by the culture of the body. Changing attitudes toward the body were a ground of dispute in American culture of the 1920s: while lower and middle-class women began to develop a new degree of awareness and self-confidence about exposing their body to the external gaze (fig. 549), weekly magazines like *Vanity Fair* regularly commented on the erasure of gender and ethnic boundaries in the beaches of New York, often expressing disdain for the "pharisees" of Coney Island and using advertising to champion "aristocratic" models of body culture (fig. 550).[98] A

97. While no surviving print from these negatives has been found, this photograph was included in Evans's checklist, "Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater" under the title "Lady Diver, Bronx signboard" (WEA 1994.250.4 [3]).

98. "The Coney Island Pharisees – Sketches by Reginald Marsh," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (August 1922), p. 51; "La-dees and Gennlemen, Step Up!!!," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (September 1926), pp. 56–57; "A Summer Afternoon at Coney Island: Native Faune Observed by Covarrubias,"

synthetic representation of these conflicting models can be seen in Evans's 1935 photograph of the French Opera barber shop in New Orleans (again, one of the iconic images of *American Photographs*), contrasting a middle-aged woman wearing a middy blouse and the ethereal beauty of youth in poster of Kränk's lemon cleansing cream (fig. 551).

A second element that may have attracted Evans's attention was the naïve realism of the illustration, an aspect of vernacular culture that is frequently found in his photographs. The caricatured woman's face, the implausible shadow cast by the her body, and the disproportionately small parasol next to her, create a conceptual tension between the subjectivity of drawing and the exactitude of the photograph. Rather than merely recording the scene, however, he experimented with different vantage points that conceptualized the relationship between real and represented space. In the farther view, Evans stood exactly where the light bracket protruding from the signboard could be seen to form a straight line with its own shadow cutting obliquely across the photograph (fig. 547).

Visual strategies of this kind, playing with the bidimensional character of the photograph, were not uncommon in the work of earlier photographers (such as, for example, Eugène De Salignac and E. O. Hoppé).[99] Evans occasionally made them so overt as to dispel the suspension of disbelief that is the rule of documentary photography and film. A different solution can be seen in a second view, taken from a closer distance and from an oblique vantage point, underscoring the faint shadow cast by the trees above, possibly related to the woman's raised arms (fig. 548). Only in the final photograph of the series the signboard was shown head-on and selectively – a straightforward type of appropriation that Evans fully developed in the following years.

Vanity Fair, Vol. 33, No. 1 (September 1929), pp. 64–65; See also"Atlantic City Sirens," *Vanity Fair*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (September 1928), p. 74.

99. See, for example, *New York Rises: Photographs by Eugène de Salignac* (New York: Aperture Foundation and New York City Department of Records/Municipal Archives, 2007), with essays by Michael Lorenzini and Kevin Moore.).

Gender relations, whether found in real life or in the products of print culture, were central to Evans's interpretation of modern America. Alan Trachtenberg, the most perceptive interpreter of *American Photographs*, has underscored the central role played in his work by "images and image-making, from photographs to hand-drawn idealizing posters" and "the theme of contrasting fantasies and realities, especially of a sexual nature."[100] Both aspects are crucial in photographs like *Torn Movie Poster* (taken in Martha's Vineyard) and *Lunch Wagon Detail, New York* (fig. 552), both from 1931, which appropriated fragments of visual narratives from the landscape of everyday life. Like his friend Ralph Steiner, Evans was often attracted by the captivating dramatizations of movie posters, but it was the popular aesthetics of naïve illustrators, sign painters, and picture postcards that he seemed to appreciate the most, especially during his repeated trips to the South in the 1930s. One can imagine that it was out of respect for one such painter that he duly recorded his name in the lower part of *Lunch Wagon Detail*: "J. Demarais / 40-11 28th Ave. Astoria." And it was probably in tune with his appreciation for the work of painter Ben Shahn (with whom he shared his studio on Bethune Street) that he photographed vernacular murals and panels in Coney Island, New York, and Havana (figs. 552, 637).[101]

Painted signs of this type were a rare find in the streets of Manhattan, but at least in one case Evans had a chance to record the interaction of vernacular imagery with the slick style of the machine age. In 1930, during the construction of Bloomingdale's new building on Lexington Avenue between 59th and 60th street, painted panels were mounted to form a faux façade hiding the lower floors, above which rose the steel skeleton of the nine-story addition. At street level, a continuous panel illustrated with silhouettes of passersby and automobiles mimicked the life on the street; on the second floor were signboards alternating Bloomingdale's slogans and cartoon-like vignettes

100. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 260.

101. See WEA 1994.255.144 (New York); WEA 1994.256.118, –232, –285 and Keller, *Walker Evans*, pls. 341–45 (Havana).

of the construction site; on the corner was a stereometric model of the new façade designed by Starrett and Van Vleck.[102] Standing at the intersection of Lexington Avenue and 59th Street, Evans photographed workers and women standing on the curb as they observed the new construction (figs. 515–520).[103] In at least two photographs, he studied the similarities between street life, illustrated signboards, and real workers on the steel frame above, placing particular attention to male/female relationships (figs. 515, 516). As in Times Square and Coney Island, New York was depicted as a combination of cheap theatrical sets. And as in Evans's views of the ITT Building or the Allied Arts Building, modern architecture was presented as a mere volumetric form concealed by a billboard-like façade.

The impermanence of the city's surfaces and the disjuncture between human life and urban space were recurrent themes in Evans's work. In Brooklyn, he photographed a combination of billboards mounted on the roofs of the buildings lined up on Fulton and Myrtle Streets, right above the Fulton Station (fig. 579). The advertising motto "TRAVEL CRUISES TOURS! THE WORLD OVER"), the fluffy clouds echoing the smoke rising from the ocean liner, and the second billboard being painted to the left ("[LIN]IT STARCH"), all conjured to create an ironic tableau about the anxieties of city life and the therapeutic promises of tourism. Again, the inconsistency between real citizens (the tiny worker on the suspension platform) and fictional characters (the gigantic figure sketched on the billboard, possibly an aviator lifting his or her arm as if drinking from a bottle) underscored the progressive dematerialization of urban experience.

Perhaps the most radical version of this idea can be seen in a series of photographs of the Gaiety Theatre (next to the Astor Theatre) on 46th Street, taken in the summer of 1930 (fig. 461). Looking up from a worm's-eye perspective, Evans recorded the installation of the electrical display covering the entire façade, hailed by the *New York Times*

102. "Bloomingdale Brothers to Erect Eleven-Story Building," *New York Times*, February 17, 1929, p. 170; "New Bloomingdale Wing," *New York Times*, October 29, 1929, p. 61.

103. See also WEA 1994.251.316 and 1994.251.337–338 for further versions of this theme.

as "the largest ever constructed for film exploitation."[104] The enormous screen, framed so as to occupy most of the picture space, resulted in a silvery rectangle echoing the surface of the photograph itself. Fragments of the city appeared in the margins, including a banner for the upcoming premiere of *Hell's Angels*, directed by Howard Hughes, and the small figurines of the workers suspended on the platform.[105] Overall it was the image of an empty screen that ideally reconfigured the whole city into a movie theatre before the projection of a motion picture.

In 1936, two years before Evans's full consecration at MoMA, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. included his work in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition.[106] For the catalogue, Barr selected *Outdoor Advertising, Florida*, a 1934 photograph that would have been unlikely without Evans's first experiments in New York City (figs. 462, 463). The photograph showed a roadside scene with a large "AAA" signboard being painted by two workers and a tree top emerging from behind; by cropping out much of the contextualizing information recorded in the original negative, Evans created an ambiguous flat space blending the painted scene and the clouds in the background.[107] As Mike Weaver has observed, in the mid-1930s Evans developed this kind of photographic *trompe l'œil*—based on "tactile texture, close attention to detail, the shallow picture-plane and intense

104. "Two Theatres for Talkie," *New York Times*, July 25, 1930, p. 23.

105. "Exciting Air Battles," *New York Times*, August 24, 1930, p. X5. A variant in the Walker Evans Archive (1994.251.294) shows a slightly different configuration: in it, Evans included extra signage on the windows of the theater (the word "music" repeated three times) and obliterated the two workers on the left, who are probably knelt down behind the "Gaiety Theare" sign.

106. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 212. See also Museum of Modern Art, press release, November 30, 1936.

107. Evans continued to investigate the fictive character of the Florida landscape in 1941, working on commission to illustrate Karl Bickel's *The Mangrove Coast: The Story of the West Coast of Florida* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1942). See *Walker Evans: Florida*, with an essay by Robert Plunket (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000).

front lighting" – into a magic-realist approach reminiscent of the work (and philosophy) of American painter William M. Harnett.[108]

Barr listed Evans among the "artists independent of the Dada-Surrealist movements," a status that corresponded with the photographer's association with the Julien Levy Gallery, New York's main venue for transatlantic modernist art influenced by French Surrealism. In 1929, Levy had actively supported Berenice Abbott's purchase of Atget's work and its American reception. It was also at the Levy Gallery that in 1932 Evans exhibited what *New York Times* critic Helen Appleton Read described as records of "the torn and soiled fragments of circus and moving picture posters and architectural jig-saw details of suburban houses," presented as "a series of stills from the motion picture of contemporary America."[109] Despite his fascination with the unconscious expressions of contemporary culture, Evans always remained faithful to the reality of his vernacular subjects and to the "styleless" style of documentary. His implicit surrealism lay elsewhere, in the discovery and rehabilitation of "aspects of the visual universe that have hitherto been disregarded as ugly or negligible," to borrow again the words of Helen Appleton Read.

Frequently, Evans employed selective framing to deconstruct the discourse of advertisement, as in a view of the billboards covering the structure of the Ninth Avenue El at the intersection of Eighth Avenue and 110th Street (then known as the "suicide curve") (fig. 530). Evans moved in toward the scene and pointed the camera upwards to exclude the shops at ground level, creating a stuttering verbiage that conflated cigarettes and seafood. With tongue-in-cheek sarcasm, the omnipresent Camel ad was cut down to

108. Mike Weaver, "Walker Evans: Magic Realist," *Creative Camera*, No. 159 (September 1977), pp. 292–95.

109. Helen Appleton Read, "The New Photography," *New York Times*, February 7, 1932, p. E6. See also Katharine Ware, "Between Dadaism and MoMA-ism at the Julien Levy Gallery," in Katharine Ware and Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), p. 48.

"els"; together with the "ROTISSERIE" sign underneath, it could be read as Evans's sour comment on the pleasures and terrors of New York mass transit.[110]

A similar attempt to reconfigure the cumulative text of advertising can be seen in two photographs of a Socony gasoline station at the intersection of Hudson and Charles Street, in which Evans experimented with horizontal and vertical formats to exclude the beginning and the end of advertising copy (figs. 211, 212). The vertical version recorded a slice of ersatz architecture of the station's faux façade, together with a composition of words reminiscent of avant-garde poetry. The last two words – "BODY SQUEAK" – seemed to play ironically with the reassuring meaning of the original sign ("body squeaks repairs") and to subvert the claims of advertising. Mutilated by the camera, words lost their semiotic function and were degraded to mere sounds or noises, as in the Dada poetry of Hugo Ball or in James Joyce's parody, "Humptydumpty Dublin squeaks through his norse, / Humptydumpty Dublin hath a horriple vorse."[111]

Evans explored the microcosm of urban gas stations at a time when rural and suburban roadscapes were becoming a popular theme for painters and photographers.[112] In a series taken on Webster Avenue and Gun Hill Road in the Bronx – decidedly distant from his familiar geography, possibly en route to Ossining or Darien where he occasionally spent the summer – he used two different cameras (possibly on different days) to assemble various elements dislocated in space (fig. 541). The three surviving

110. This particular advertising campaign, launched by the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in 1919, included the line "They're the men who demand real quality in everything they buy. They look deeper than the surface." See T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abudance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 347.

111. "James Joyce, Ad-Writer," *transition*, No. 21 (March 1932), p. 258. Joyce wrote this nursery rhyme for the first English edition, published by Faber and Faber in 1931, of *Haveth Childers Everywhere. Fragment from Work in Progress* (Paris: Henry Babou and Jack Kahane; New York: Fountain Press, 1930). See *Letters of James Joyce*, vols. II and III, edited by Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 247.

112. For an early example of the popularization of gas stations, see [James Agee,] "The Great American Roadside," *Fortune*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1934), pp. 53–63, 172, 174, 177.

photographs show that Evans tried to create a formal connection between the cropped sign in the left foreground ("EC / TIONS / SOLINE / SERVICE") and the apartment building under construction in the distance, where tiny figures of workers could be seen climbing the fire escape. By juxtaposing the decorative geometry of the station's façade and the cubical mass of the modern building, the Kesbec station photographs corroborate Mendelsohn's ideas about the "grotesque" character of New York's commercial culture. At the same time, they offer a rare counter-image of the emergence of roadside architecture in 1920s New York. Kesbec was a small chain founded by the Calder family, which purportedly had invented "the first real 'drive in' station in New York" in 1914.[113] In 1926, the company launched a campaign in the *New York Times* to advertise its thirty-plus locations, using lengthy copy to tell the story of the family business and photographs to acquaint prospective customers with the chain's stations. The second article in the series presented the same Webster Avenue station recorded by Evans few years later: designed as an eclectic mix of tile roofs and large modernist signs, it was meant to mirror the character of a business that had "gone ahead aggressively, but always conservatively and constructively" (fig. 542).[114]

Although it is unlikely that Evans ever saw this ad, it provides a useful background to understand his ability to detect those elements of the urban landscape hinting at larger trends of material and cultural change. In the final view (the only one for which a print exists), Evans moved slightly to the right, which allowed him to underscore the fragmentation of forms at the center of the composition and to include the upper sign – "PARETEX WALLS" – in its entirety. The importance of this sign, however marginal in the visual economy of the picture, is suggested by the fact that this photograph was included

113. William C. Freeman, "Kesbec Gasoline Stations," advertisement pages, *New York Times*, October 11 and October 18, 1926, p. 12. By 1931, Kesbec was controlled by Standard Oil: Ralph Henrietta M. Larson, Evelyn H. Knowlton, and Charles S. Popple, *History of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey):* Vol. 3, *New Horizons, 1927–1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 267.

114. William C. Freeman, "Kesbec Gasoline Stations," advertisement page, *New York Times*, October 18, 1926, p. 12.

in Evans's checklist "Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater" under the title "Kesbec Service – Paretex Walls."[115] Hart Crane incorporated similar ads in "The River" section of *The Bridge*, where billboards are seen from the window of a rushing train:

> Stick your patent name on a signboard
> brother – all over – going west – young man
> Tintex – Japalac – Certain-teed Overalls ads
> and lands sakes! under the new playbill ripped
> in the guaranteed corner – see Bert Williams what?[116]

Besides the onomatopoeic similarities between Evans's title and Crane's verse, a thematic connection can be found in the fact that Paretex, Tintex, and Japalac were all wall-finishing materials patented in the 1920s.[117] In the previous chapters we have already mentioned Evans's interest in the raw materials of the city, testified by occasional photographs depicting the textures and patterns of metal, stone, or wood. His many photographs of hardware stores selling paint and enamel, however, suggest that it was mostly the semiotic and metaphorical aspect of the city's surface that triggered his imagination.[118] Ubiquitous advertising, false fronts, wall decorations, and coating paints,

115. See WEA 1994.250.4 (3) and Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, p. 173.

116. Crane, *The Bridge* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), p. 22. This literary antecedent has been suggested by Douglas Eklund ("Exile's Return," p. 30) with reference to Evans's photograph of the 9th Avenue El discussed above (fig. 530). Stating that Evans "breaks the message into word fragments to uncover its methods of persuasions," Eklund finds analogies with works like e. e. cummings's "Poem, or Beauty hurts Mr. Vinal," included *Is 5* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), which Evans owned. See also John Baker, "Commercial Sources for Hart Crane's *The Bridge*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter-Spring 1965), pp. 45–55.

117. Japalac, a fast drying varnish, was trade-marked from the words "Japan" and "laquer": Clayton L. Jenks, "Selection of a Trade Mark," *Chemical Age*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (February 1925), p. 47.

118. See also WEA 1994.251.331 ("enamel") and WEA 1994.253.28 (Granitile and "canned wood").

were all symptoms of a civilization witnessing a loss of unity between structure and surface, production and consumption, work and leisure, experience and appearance.[119] Evans made this point in one of his earliest photographs, taken in November 1928, showing a group of workers sitting for a lunch break on the sidewalk of 41st Street at Second Avenue (fig. 362).[120] The building façade against which they were leaning was actually a store window displaying various types of fake wall panels, which created uncertainty between mass and decoration, and between actual and imitation surfaces of the city. Like the workers Evans photographed on Lexington Avenue while looking at the faux façade of the new Bloomingdale's building under construction (figs. 515–520), it was not the heroic moment of the city's growth that was recorded, but a theatrical stage with motionless, disfunctional characters.

Evans's included this photograph in the series "Sent to Russia with W. Goldwater" with the title *Workmen's Lunch Hour – Qualitona Enamel*, after the sign of a paint recorded at the top right corner of the scene. The double caption brings us back to its immediate documentary theme, a subject that Evans recorded on several occasions. In 1929, for example, he took *City Lunch Counter*, showing three men eating behind the window of a diner at the corner of Lexington and 44th Street (fig. 429). Published in *Creative Art* as the closing image of a series entitled "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," it was accompanied by a line that ridiculed the eating habits of city dwellers: "'Hurry up please, it's time.' New York City's quick lunch. The foundations

119. Sigfried Kracauer spoke in 1922 of relations "of a superficial sort, the idea having become pure decoration, an ostentatious façade for a partly rotten interior which represents, together with this façade, a unity that is nothing short of a mockery of spirit": "Die Gruppe als Ideentrager," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (August 1922), pp. 594–622, trans. "The Group as Bearer of Ideas," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 143–70, quotation p. 167.

120. The date of the photograph ("11-28") inscribed on the back of a print the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum (84.XM.956.126) is consistent with construction work recorded by Percy Loomis Sperr in October 1928 (NYPL 0521-B3).

of dyspepsia for the million".[121] As in *Workmen's Lunch Hour – Qualitona Enamel*, the photograph caught the facial expressions of the workers with their mouth full as they gobbled their cheap food on the fly. Caricatures of this kind may remind similar depictions of the time, such as *The Snack Bar*, 1930 by Edward Burra, an illustrator who regularly contributed to *Vanity Fair* (fig. 433). Yet Evans's irony was not aimed at the workers themselves: suspended in mid-action, their body frozen in awkward poses (fig. 209), they rather seemed to express a sense of introspection and insulation from the city's routine. Thus in a poem by MacKnight Black, "Street-cleaner stops for lunch," published in 1925:

> His fathers had eaten their bread and cheese
> In the noon shade of vineyards,
> And lain, heavy with sun, and stared
> At the Italian sky.
>
> His thick brown fingers
> Push bread and cheese and bologna
> Between bright teeth
> Into the red dark warmth of his mouth.
> He chews heavily,
> With his eyes toward one cloud
> Caught on the canyon top
> Of the street.[122]

121. "Mr. Walker Evans Records a City's Scene," *Creative Art*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (December 1930), p. 456. The line "Hurry up please, it's time" was culled from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), pp. 23–26 ("II. A Game of Chess," vv. 141, 152, 165, 168–69).

122. MacKnight Black, "Street-Cleaner Stops for Lunch," *Poetry*, Vol. 26, No. 5, New Poets' Number (August 1925), p. 259.

The relationship of New Yorkers with the textual background of everyday life forms a recognizable section of Evans's early work. An early example is the iconic *Fulton Street Girl*, 1929, reminiscent of Grosz's acidic caricatures of street life in Berlin and (after 1932) New York (figs. 134, 135). In the spring of 1931, Evans took two snapshots at the intersection of Seventh Avenue and 16th Street, showing one of one of three symmetrical buildings built by the Henry Mandel Company in 1930–1931 as part of Chelsea Corners, a program meant to reshape the avenue between 14th and 23rd Street as a new residential area for white-collar workers in the neighborhood (figs. 327, 328).[123] In the first photograph, taken from the sidewalk across the street, Evans recorded the competition between a vendor's cart in the foreground, with handwritten signs advertising "Fresh peanuts 5¢ a bag," and the large announcement of a new drugstore in the background. The two forms of advertising reflected different stages of commercial culture, each one with its particular aesthetics: while peanuts and chocolates were neatly displayed on the checkered tablecloth with serrated edges of the sculptural cart, the new drugstore vocally advertised itself from the geometrical mass of an anodyne building. In between was a modern car, whose curvaceous shapes appeared to mirror the cart's handles in the foreground – a theme that Evans had explicitly in another photograph taken on 96th Street (fig. 528). In the second version, Evans walked across the street to portray an African-American nanny with white child in a pram, against the backdrop of the large drugstore sign that he framed so as to disrupt its message. Not all of Evans's photographs achieved the same level of accomplishment: in this case, he was probably less interested in the sign itself than in the racial theme, which anticipates a similar photograph of the mid-1950 in Robert Frank's *The Americans*.[124] Also significant (although

123. "Lower 7th Avenue as New Home Area," *New York Times*, November 23, 1930, p. 155; "Tall Apartments in Village Centre," *New York Times*, September 27, 1931, p. RE1; Christopher Gray, "Four 30's Apartment Buildings on 4 Chelsea Corners," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004, p. RE7.

124. Robert Frank, *Charleston, South Carolina*, 1955, in *The Americans* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pl. 13.

not self-evident), as in many of the photographs we have considered so far, is Evans's attraction for urban spaces that were in the process of being reconfigured by modern architecture.

A striking example of the subtle irony with which Evans could address the theme of advertising is a photograph taken in Times Square, looking north from 47th Street (figs. 464). It shows a man seen from behind, overshadowed by the fragments of a large commercial sign, "ep od n." As in many snapshots of street life taken during this period, the man is portrayed in a moment of suspension, an anti-climactic figure standing in the middle of the city's hubbub. The scattered letters of the sign hovering above his head are yet another version of Evans's passion for the visual poetry of the street, similar to a 1916 poem by Richard Huelsenbeck that he may have read in the *Little Review*:[125]

a a o	a e i	i i i	o i i
ou ou o	ou ou e	ou i e	a i i
ha dzk	drrr bn	obn br	bouss boum
ha haha	hi hi hi	l i l i l i	leïomen

Considering the post-1929 mood, this view of Times Square seemed to exceed the ordinary grotesque observed by Mendelsohn, conveying instead a sense of displacement and utter decay. An avid collector of newspaper clippings and photographs recording the monstrous anthropology of contemporary life, Evans may have also perceived the subliminal irony of this found image: the remnants of a gigantic Pepsodent sign commanding the view of Times Square, the "ep od n" ciphers now looming over the solitary man like the grin of a toothless mouth.[126]

125. Richard Huelsenbeck, "Chorus Sanctus," *The Little Review*, No. 10 (Spring 1924), p. 20.

126. See also fig. 251 for a later instance of the same strategy. For Evans's collection of "Pictures of the Time," see Rosenheim, *Unclassified*, pp. 212 ff.

With the onset of the Depression, Evans explored yet another version of commercial communication, this time physically related to the body. Especially in the area near 14th Street, sandwich men and women advertising gold-buying shops, barbershops, and cafeterias, together with the unemployed (and occasionally the strikers) of Union Square, formed the urban landscape of the economic downturn. Evans may have shared in part the opinion of his friend, Hanns Skolle, who in 1931 wrote him from Southern France:

> That ever-present 14th street sense of futility has been cleared out of my system by fresh figs, by the generous sun, the unbelievable colour, the playful architecture, the mountains – free from desecrating advertisements and a million other subtle things which I would show in photographs if I had the money. You can't imagine how cynical your tin-can America looks from here. I got a new angle on things altogether.[127]

In December 1933, the sociological and economic aspects of "cynical tin-can America" were discussed by *New York Times* critic John W. Harrington. It was ironic, he wrote, to observe "vagrants, unshaven and shorn, advertise cut-rate barber shops," but these "sandwichers" recruited from the Bowery often earned a meagre 50-cent living a day and were constantly exposed to the risk of being arrested for loitering.[128] Also in December, sandwich men and street peddlers were the subject of a series of photographs by Robert Disraeli published in *Survey Graphic* to illustrate an article by Lyman Bryson on youth, education, and the prospects of the job market.[129]

127. Hanns Skolle to Walker Evans, September 26, 1931 (WEA 1994.260.26 [106]).

128. John W. Harrington, "Uplift for the 'Sandwicher'," *New York Times*, December 3, 1933, p. SM16.

129. Lyman Bryson, "Education for What," *Survey Graphic*, Vol. 22, No. 12 (December 1933), pp. 619–21, 638–39.

Internal evidence shows that Evans photographed the sandwich men of 14th Street in the summer of 1934, except for a photograph he took in Brooklyn during his earliest period of work, showing a sandwich man at the intersection of Washington and Johnson Streets carrying the advertisement of a photographic store nearby (fig. 578).[130] This photograph may have been inspired by Paul Strand's *Untitled*, 1916 (fig. 577), in which tight framing and a long lens contributed to the sense of spatial compression between the sandwich board and the "POST NO BILLS" sign in the background. Arguably, however, what drove Evans to photograph the Brooklyn sandwich man was the conceptual mirroring between his own photography and the commercial work advertised by the sign. This theme was forcefully expressed in the opening sequence of *American Photographs*, particularly in *License Photo Studio*, 1934 (fig. 227) and *Penny Picture Display, Savannah*, 1936 (fig. 478).[131] Evans's first attempts to photograph photographs and photographers, however, were made in New York. In addition to the Brooklyn sandwich man, in 1933–1934 he made a lengthy series on a street photographer working at the intersection of Bleecker and Cornelia streets in the Village.[132] And an early version of the famous *Penny Picture Display* can be seen in a 1935 photograph of the De Pinna Building on Fifth Avenue, where he recorded a picture display of the De Pach Brothers photographic studio together with a plaque advertising the "WILSON METHOD / SLENDERETTE SHOP" (fig. 477).

Cruising 14th Street in 1934, however, Evans privileged the straightforward record of the men at work. His photographs show precisely the kind of contradictions illustrated by the *New York Times* the year before, with destitute men advertising a "beauty school" in front of Ohrbach's clothing store (fig. 315), or a young girl reminiscent of

130. The 1934 date is suggested by a negative fragment (WEA 1994.253.103.1-.2) showing the cover of the August, 1934 issue of *Cosmopolitan*.

131. Alan Trachtenberg, "Walker Evans' America: A Documentary Invention," in *Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*, edited by David Featherstone (Carmel, Cal.: The Friends of Photography, 1984), pp. 56–66 and Ibid., *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 240 ff.

132. See WEA 1994.253.253–260.

the clumsy woman in front of the New Orleans French Opera Barber Shop (fig. 317). Some of the photographs show the casual encounter of boards and signs in the crowded space of the street (fig. 316), or the juxtaposition with the store signs of Union Square (figs. 318, 319).[133]

An outstanding example of this type of combination is the portrait of an African-American steward carrying on his back a "WE BUY GOLD" placard (fig. 320). Evans photographed the young man across from the Civic Repertory Theatre, a "militant" theatre on 14th Street, founded in 1926 by Eva Le Gallienne, that specialized in social themes and offered affordable prices as well as free acting classes.[134] Behind the man, exactly to the right of his placard, Evans included the announcement for *Stevedore*, a drama on race riots between African-American longshoremen and their bosses that was widely covered in the press when it premiered on April 18, 1934 (fig. 322). With a cast of "twenty Negro and ten white actors," it staged the story of a stevedore unjustly detained for assaulting a white woman, his collaboration with a white labor organizer, and the alliance between black stevedores and AFL workers in the ensuing riots. Based on racial clashes that occurred in St. Louis, Chicago, New Orleans, Detroit, and Tuscaloosa since 1919, the drama was hailed by *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson as "a highly frenzied drama that has progressed out of racial languors into blunt action." The reviewer praised the strong characterization of "Negro life," which reminded him of a group of African-American longshoremen he had once seen in Mobile: "They were a heartening throng. They were living. They were discussing. They were frisking with animal glee."[135]

133. Further examples are shown in WEA 1994.253.150.1-.2, WEA 1994.253.151.1.

134. Margaret Larkin, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, March 18, 1934, p. X2. Berenice Abbott photographed the façade of the Civic Repertory Theatre on July 2, 1936 (fig. 321). The theatre closed in 1933 and was demolished in 1938.

135. Brooks Atkinson, "Rioting on the Waterfront," *New York Times*, April 29, 1934, p. X1.

Evans's pedestrian advertiser – young, slim, looking mildly into the camera in his white gloves and neatly-ironed uniform – had little in common with the "raw-boned Negro dock roustabout" of *Stevedore*.[136] Together with the actual longshoreman Evans had portrayed on South Street in 1929 (fig. 260), the 42nd Street "Negress" with the Royal Baking Powder ad (fig. 405), the lanky Havana man in a panama hat, and other African-American characters he had photographed over the years, the 14th Street advertiser was part of a catalogue of social types reminiscent of August Sander's project *Antlitz der Zeit*, a book that Evans had reviewed very favorably in 1931.[137] But the 14th Street boy stood also as a test to, and perhaps a disavowal of, the utopian proletariat of the Civic Repertory Theatre: wearing a uniform of the Pedestrian Advertising Company, he was part of the "organized corps" described in the *New York Times*, set up by a promoter who "drilled them to walk with easy grace, coached them in pavement etiquette, and saw that they were well-groomed, so to speak."[138]

In the 1947 edition of the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* catalogue, Evans was presented as an American artist educated at Williams College and Paris and "influenced by Atget."[139] This influence was most visible in Evans's fascination with the city's shop windows. As a personal friend of Berenice Abbott, he was among the first in New York who had the opportunity to study Atget's prints. In 1929, Abbott began to introduce his work to the American public, and the following year the first monograph on Atget was published jointly in three languages.[140] Of the extensive catalogue of subjects pho-

136. Brooks Atkinson, "Drama of the Race Riot in 'Stevedore,' Put On by the Theatre Union" *New York Times*, April 19, 1934, p. 33.

137. Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," p. 33.

138. Harrington, "Uplift for the 'Sandwicher'," p. SM16.

139. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1947), p. 251.

140. Berenice Abbott, "Eugène Atget," *Creative Art*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 1929), pp. 651–56; B. J. Kospoth, "Eugène Atget," *transition*, No. 15 (February 1929), pp. 122–24; *Atget: Photographe de Paris*, preface by Pierre Mac-Orlan (Paris: Henri Jonquières and New York: E. Weythe, 1930); *E. Atget: Lichtbilder*, preface by Camille Recht (Paris and Leipzig: Henri Jonquières, 1930).

tographed by Atget – ranging from historic monuments to prostitutes – shop fronts seemed the most easily translatable into an American idiom, especially at a time when vernacular culture was being rediscovered as an antidote to the rootlessness of "modern" art. Photographers and architects found themselves affiliated in this program, and it is significant that *Architectural Forum* was among the first magazines to publish Atget's photographs to illustrate an article on "Parisian shop fronts."[141]

Photographs like Evans's *People's Restaurant* (fig. 230) and Abbott's *Blossom Restaurant* (fig. 231), both taken on the Bowery, incorporated the basic elements of Atget's "documents" to create a visual record of "old New York." Even within the limits of the documentary style applied to vernacular subjects, Evans occasionally experimented with the forms and materials of modernist buildings, as in the patchwork of metallic textures of a shop window at 45 Fulton Street (fig. 132). However, it was especially in the organized chaos of New York's hardware stores that Evans applied the teachings of Atget. The repetitive display of objects, the involuntary assemblage of mechanical parts (reminiscent of Picabia) (fig. 581), even the frozen violence of tools like scissors and seesaws (figs. 582), were all potential elements for a reinterpretation of the machine age that acknowledged the incongruities of modernity. Thus in a photograph of the McArthur's Cut Rate Hardware store at 216 Fulton Street, Evans recorded a display of farming tools (shovels, rakes, and watering cans) with a cloaked customer that had all the quaintness of a Parisian street. However, by turning the camera 90 degrees he also included a car scuttling in the distance on the Second Avenue El – a sensorial rift in the surrealistic calm of a staged countryside (fig. 139).

A similar attempt to probe the limits of Atget's non-compositional approach can be seen in two views of rundown shops on Stanton Street, just around the corner from

141. Leigh French, "Small Parisian Shop Fronts," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (June 1929), pp. 885–93. An American architect who occasionally wrote about French architecture, Leigh French Jr. was the author of *Colonial Interiors: Photographs and Measured Drawings of the Colonial and Early Federal Periods* (New York: William Helburn, Inc., 1923).

the Bowery (figs. 233, 234). Again, both photographs record an unconscious accumulation of vernacular signs. The locksmith panel with Italian lettering roughly painted by unskilled hands, the horseshoe sign of "DEGRAZIA BROTHERS", the wooden board with a "DanGer / Keep Away" notice covering the broken glass of a shoe repair shop, the professionally-made sign "OFFICE FIXTURES CO. / ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORK," are all traces of an ethnically-mixed neighborhood, where five-story tenements could still provide cheap residential space to immigrant families working in the shops at street level or in the small workshops located in the inner courtyards.[142] While in 1930 Atget's bars and courtyards could be seen as the French product of "an ordered and rational manner consistent with the national genius," it seems likely that in Stanton Street Evans found the expression of a more complex city, a mingling of Main Street America with the backwardness of a Southern Italian village that was being heavily hit by the Depression.[143]

The Stanton Street photographs clearly show how easily Evans could twist the norms of documentary photography and experiment with issues that were familiar among 1920s avant-garde artists. In one of the negatives, probably the first he made on that day, Evans organized a sequence of signs according to the dynamic perception of an average person strolling on the sidewalk (fig. 233). By simply turning the camera to the left he then explored a wholly different composition, in which the ordering perspective of the street is missing and a complex configuration of elements is brought to the fore (fig. 234). Individual elements of ordinary experience (the shop windows, the door, the

142. The "office fixtures" sign originally indicated the workshop of Caspar Iba, a German immigrant naturalized in 1884: see *New York, Index to Petitions for Naturalization filed in New York City, 1792-1989* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007 and the company's advertising in *The Tourist Companion and Guide*, edited by J. Perkins Tracy (New York: Austin Publishing Co., 1887), n.p. The handwritten sign was probably related to Salvatore Villareale, an Italian blacksmith who immigrated in 1912: see *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, District No. 31–119, Sheet No. 9B.

143. French, "Small Parisian Shop Fronts," p. 885

signs) were now shown as fragments colliding with each another; the visual field was structured by two-dimensional signs (such as the x-shaped rail and the curved chain in the lower foreground) that obstructed the view; overall, the whole scene resulted in a frustrating experience, with visual blocks, spatial ambiguities, and a general sense of contrived order, on all of which floated the dream-image of three keys, a pair of scissors, and a knife.[144]

Atget's direct influence on Evans has long been observed in his photographs of mannequins and window displays (figs. 535, 538).[145] While the Surrealistic implications of these images cannot be underestimated, it should be noted that during the 1920s this theme had crossed the borders of artistic symbolism to enter the larger cultural debate.[146] In 1930, *Fortune* published an article on recent trends in fashion, explaining that with the shift of dressmakers from colors and patterns to "figures revealed by innuendos of fabric," mannequins were becoming the rule in New York's store windows.[147] The text was largely illustrated with photographs of the "anatomically explicit model" being designed and assembled in German workshops – a typically male fantasy of feminine submission and replaceability. The change in perspective can be gleaned by a 1933 article by Frances Perkins in *Survey Graphic*, "The Cost of a Five-dollar Dress," in which the same visual theme (a photograph of a window display by Irving Browning Photo), opened a discussion on the relationship between low retail prices and underpaid sweatshop work (fig. 534).[148] At

144. Although orchestrated according to a whole different program, some of these elements can be seen in a work by Fernand Léger – *Keys and Figures*, 1929 (fig. 106) – reproduced in *Creative Art* in 1931: see André Kormendi, "Fernand Léger," *Creative Art*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 1931), pp. 218–22.

145. Richard Whelan, *Double Take: A Comparative Look at Photographs* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1981), pp. 108–9.

146. For a cultural history of Paris mannequins, see Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity*, pp. 80 ff.

147. "Model Women," *Fortune*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (September 1930), pp. 89–91.

148. Frances Perkins, "The Cost of a Five-dollar Dress," *Survey Graphic*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (February 1933), pp. 75–78.

about the same time, Evans had begun to document the social consequences of the Depression, travelling to West 125th Street for a series on the H. C. F. Koch department store (fig. 535). In 1930, the Koch family had opted for selling the store rather than meeting the demands for equal opportunity from the African-American community.[149] By recording the reopening under a new management in the summer of 1934, Evans gave an entire new meaning to the uncanny mannequins of De Chirico's "metaphysical" paintings and to their French and German successors.[150]

A deeper thread of Surrealist motifs, often involving parts of the human body, is evident in photographs like *Store Window, Brooklyn*, c. 1931, an image showing stacks of felt hats pressed against a cracked window pane carrying the number "165" (fig. 585), thematically close to Atget's *Boutique, Marché aux Halles*, 1925 (fig. 584). Similarly, the plain record (printed reversed left to right) of a window display lining up such disparate items as a scale, a hat mold, a mannequin head, and an unidentifed four-legged contraption, seemed to claim for itself the prototypical Surrealist definition (by Lautréamont) of "the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella" (fig. 589). Or, to quote from Hal Foster: "If the hat makes the man, then it follows that without the hat the man is little; that is, without his phallic embellishments, his hypotrophic trophies, the man is deficient."[151]

At his best, however, Evans managed to endow his photographs with the Janus qualities of the "lyric documentary," as he had come to describe his attitude in the 1960s. Thus *Wash Day*, with its anthropomorphic shirts billowing above Washington Street, could be interpreted as a recasting of Man Ray's *Moving Sculpture* published on the cover of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1926, but also as a vernacular image of "Little Syria,"

149. According to Nat Brandt, "a black woman shopping in Blumstein's or Koch's on 125th Street was not allowed to try on a dress within the store." See *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 42.

150. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 119–20.

151. Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 179.

as the neighborhood was then known (figs. 167, 168).[152] Similarly, the votive candles in the shape of women's heads, torsos, and limbs that he photographed in Roosevelt Street (figs. 219, 224) had the same Surrealistic tones later dramatized by Herbert Bayer's *Self-portrait* (fig. 220); yet they also offered an anthropological study of the city in the vein of of Percy Loomis Sperr, who on August 16, 1933, had photographed similar objects as part of an extensive reportage on the Feast of St. Roch (fig. 223).[153] That Evans was not oblivious of larger issues related to social identity, ethnic attitudes, and commecial culture, is further suggested by two variant prints of *Votive Candles* in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum (fig. 219), in which an American banner and an ice cream shop sign can be seen looming above the devotional paraphernalia displayed by the Italian community.

5.4 Coda: looking into a mirror

Sometime in the early 1930s, Evans happened upon a scene on West 14th Street right across from Hearn's Department Store: scattered on the curb and on a moving truck were pieces of furniture, a framed painting, an unmounted piano, a lamp, and in the midst of it all a wooden horse (fig. 311). Using his 2 ½ × 4 ¼ inch camera he took four photographs, recording the unintentional assemblage and two men standing next to it, posing knowingly for the photographer. Returning to the scene later, he exposed three more negatives of the horse next to a large tin can, the last items left on the sidewalk (fig. 312). Like Atget, who in 1899 had recorded a similar scene in Paris with his bulky camera on a tripod (fig. 310), Evans must have been attracted by the uncanny spectacle

152. See *La Révolution Surréaliste*, No. 6 (March 1, 1926). The same motif was the subject of photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Ralph Steiner.

153. The New York Public Library holds a collection of about 90 photographs made by Sperr on this subject.

of the furniture laid out on the street, which offered a whole new perspective on the surrounding city. And its was probably as a homage to Atget's passion for carousels and circuses that he kneeled down to portray the lonely wooden horse left on the curb. Yet unlike other artists who photographed this motif – including Manuel Álvarez Bravo's *Los obstáculos*, 1929 (fig. 313) – Evans was less interested in the symbolic power of individual objects than in the unexpected relationships between urban signs.[154] Passersby could be seen drifting in the distance, and lingering behind the protagonists of this urban stage were the harsh calls of the "HEARN," "DEUTSCH," and "FURS" signs. Similar perceptions had been articulated by Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico in an essay published in 1927:

> The reader may have noticed the singular appearance of beds, mirror-fronted wardrobes, armchairs, divans, and tables when one comes across them unexpectedly in a street in the midst of unaccustomed surroundings [...]. The pieces of furniture then appear in a new light: they are reclothed in a strange solitude, a great intimacy grows between them, and one could say that a strange happiness hovers in the narrow space they occupy on the pavement in the midst of the fevered life of the town and the hasty comings and goings of men.[155]

154. On Álvarez Bravo's independent admiration for Atget, see Roberto Tejada, *In Focus: Manuel Alvarez Bravo: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), p. 120.

155. Giorgio de Chirico, "Statues, Meubles et Généraux," *Bulletin de l'effort moderne*, No. 38 (March 1927), pp. 7–12, trans. "Statues, Furniture, and Generals," in Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 509–11, quotation p. 510. Evans may have been aware of De Chirico's ideas (and of paintings like *Furniture in the Valley*, 1927) both from his sojourn in Paris and from the conspicuous shows of his work mounted in New York between 1928 and 1930: see Katherine Robinson, "Giorgio De Chirico – Julien Levy, Artist and Art Dealer. Shared Experience," Metafisica, No. 7–8 (2000), pp. 326–56.

Taking temporary refuge on the island of his private belongings, Evans's African-American man was the metaphor of the modern citizen trapped by the "filthy punctured cubes" of the skyscraper and assaulted by the inducements of advertising. But the 14th Street scene was also a manifestation of an issue that ran implicitly through Evans's project: the precarious relationship between public and private space, between citizenship and subjectivity. Except for occasional portraits of friend's bedrooms (such as John Cheever and Cary Ross), in New York Evans had confined his explorations to the public space of the street; and while he often photographed the city from tall buildings, he never stopped to record office interiors or private apartments.[156] By recording the intimacy of the home laid bare on 14th Street, Evans offered a theatrical representation of subjectivity stifled by metropolitan anomie, while at the same time prodiving a metaphor for his own work. After all, each one of his New York photographs recorded a similar attempt to inhabit the city, to find a vantage point from which the contradictions of the metropolis could be taken in or scoffed at, to construct a visual space that could be shared by other citizens.

In around 1931 Evans photographed this theme on two more occasions, stressing the opposite polarities of the public/private nexus. At 90 First Avenue, he portrayed Samuel Rosenzweig's "furniture & bedding" store, a public space where perceptions of intimacy were displayed, negotiated, and monetized (fig. 240). And somewhere in Brooklyn he took *Mirror*, where he depicted instead a symbolic space of solitude and self-confrontation (fig. 615). Exhibited in the group show "New York by New York Photographers" at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1932, *Mirror* was hailed by one reviewer as an "incredible study of chaos," probably on account of the population of

156. See Evans, *American Photographs*, pl. I/43 and Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, p. 37, respectively, for Cheever's and Ross's bedrooms. Beginning in 1929, however, Evans took important photographs of interiors, including the house of a Portuguese family in Truro, where he vacationed with Ben Shahn; and in 1934 he took a series of photographs of Muriel Draper's apartment.

insect-like chairs on a truck reflected in the mirror.[157] The photograph was possibly a homage to a photograph by Atget, showing a row of chairs reflected in a mirror at the Hôtel Matignon, the Austrian Embassy, in 1905 (fig. 614). Evans may also have seen a 1927 painting by Glenn O. Coleman, *The Mirror*, probably exhibited at the Valentine Gallery in 1928 (fig. 616).[158] But compared to the narrative of the painting – entailing the melancholy of an artist's bedroom, the signs of a woman, and the deserted city reflected in the mirror – the Brooklyn scene abruptly denied the romantic pleasures of distantiation and loss, offering instead a blocked view with incomprehensible scribbles chalked on the door. Inside and outside space, the bedroom and the street, were ideally brought to a modernist unity, balancing the physical and symbolic realities of the nominal subject with a subtle perception of the world's abstract patterns and forms. With all the seductiveness of an image within an image, *Mirror* invited the viewer to penetrate into its reflected space in search of the city, of a hint, of an event. Yet it was outside the mirror frame, on the photograph's margins, that Evans inscribed his skeptical doubt: upon closer inspection, one could detect that the mortar joints of the wall behind the chest drawer had been minutely painted with white lines, not unlike the fictional city of a billboard or a Coney Island funhouse.

157. "These Photographs Delight," *New York Times*, May 8, 1932, p. N6.

158. E[dward] A[llen] J[ewell], "Davis Tames a Shrew – How What Seemed 'Abstract' Proved 'Realistic' – Glenn Coleman and Picabia," *New York Times*, April 29, 1928, p. XX18.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation investigates the early New York City photographs of Walker Evans, from the artist's first forays into the medium in June 1927 to his portrayal of older, dilapidated buildings on South and West Street in 1933–1934, in the midst of the Depression. This study develops two distinct lines of investigation. On the one hand, it engages in a close reading of Evans's photographic text, including individual images, the Walker Evans Archive in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the early publications of Evans's work. On the other, research extends to consider the larger cultural context of the late 1920s that formed the background of the photographer's work. Together, these two levels of analysis make it possible to formulate well-founded assumptions about Evans's critical interpretation of New York in the crucial years immediately preceding and following 1929.

At the root of this study stands a historiographical issue related to the understanding of Evans's career. Current scholarship underscores the fragmentary and experimental character of his early photographs, as well as the influence played on his style by the European avant-garde of the 1920s. Based on these premises, Evans's New York photographs have been excluded from the canon of his later documentary work on Depression America, both stylistically (owing to their "modernist" and "abstract" language) and thematically (on the basis of their metropolitan focus). As discussed in Chapter 1, however, this general interpretation stems from a partial reading of Evans's work. First, these generalizations are made on the basis of a relatively small number of photographs; second, interpretations of Evans's early work have privileged the literary, as opposed to the visual, culture of the photographer.

These historiographical observations have shaped this dissertation's hypotheses and

methodology. A preliminary decision has been to subject to systematic analysis all the types of historical sources presently available for study: negatives, written notes, scrapbooks, personal documents, correspondence, and what remains of Evans's library, now comprising the Walker Evans Archive; photographic prints in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and other major repositories; published and exhibited portfolios; and later interviews and publications by Evans.

While the existence of several variants of the same print has helped us to understand the particular value attached by Evans to specific photographs, important questions are raised by the materials in the Walker Evans Archive. Arguably, the surviving negatives are only a small portion of all the photographs that Evans actually took during his first years of work. Should they be considered as a mere accumulation of working materials left behind by the photographer, perhaps curtailed by accidental losses, or rather as an archival "text" intentionally selected and organized by their maker? If an intentional "text," when and how was the selection made, and what does it say about Evans's self-representation as an uncultivated visual artist? Furthermore, how should we evaluate the significant quantity of negatives for which no print has survived? Finally, what is the internal chronology of Evans's first years of work?

Many of these questions have no definite answers, but cross-examination of all the available sources – including annotations on negative sleeves, photographic formats, existing prints, the photographs' internal evidence, as well as Evans's exhibited, published, and planned series – sustains plausible hypotheses. Whether the present state of the Walker Evans Archive was defined at the time when the photographs were made, or is the result of retrospective or even posthumous editing, the surviving negatives appear to be an integral part of Evans's early work on New York, even when they may seem formally unaccomplished. Overall, Evans focused on five major areas of interest: skyscrapers, industrial subjects, billboards and shop windows, the Manhattan waterfront, and people (the latter considered only marginally in this study). Whenever possible, nominal subjects and approximate dates have been established – a less arduous task for

photographs depicting buildings under construction – indicating a concentration on new skyscrapers and advertising billboards in the period 1928–1931 and a prevalence of smaller buildings and people in 1932–1934.

A further question addresses the nature and the objectives of Evans's urban explorations. The serial character of his earliest surviving photographs, the recurrence of specific themes, the published and exhibited portfolios, all support the idea that Evans saw New York City as a photographic subject in and of itself, rather than a mere trove of visual materials. The distinction between the practice of taking photographs *in* the city and developing a project *on* New York carries important methodological consequences. For if we accept that Evans was interested in creating a portrait of New York at such a crucial date as 1929, then it is the historian's task to move beyond traditional notions of form and style to investigate the ways in which the photographer conceptualized and reinterpreted the cultural reality of his nominal subject. In other words, the question at stake is whether Evans, as often claimed, saw the skyscraper as a mere source of modernist forms abstracted from the reality of the city, or whether he was interested in specific buildings at a specific moment in the city's history. Opting for the second hypothesis, this study posits that Evans's New York should be seen not only as a response to the formal experiments of European avant-garde photography, but also, and most significantly, as a way to engage the urban experience of the layman and the disciplinary images of the modern city that were being shaped and debated by architects, planners, and architectural critics.

Accordingly, ekphrasis has been utilized in this study to reactivate the experiential factor that lies implicit even in Evans's most formalized pictures. While the attempt to translate into words the subtleties and uncertainties of the image may sometime run the risk of overinterpretation, this strategy has been deemed necessary to convey Evans's "constructivist" approach. Although the verbs "depict," "record," or "portray" are often used in this dissertation for want of better terms, in fact most of his photographs embody an act of looking that is meant to probe the space and the signs of the

modern city. Early on, Evans defined his ambitious program to work within the norms of ordinary seeing to inject doubts in our assumptions and interpretations. To illustrate this attitude, this study builds upon the traditional notion of formal analysis to include the mechanics of Evans's urban exploration (choice of vantage point) and picture-taking (framing), together with iconographic comparisons with contemporary images of the same subject made by architects, illustrators, photographers, and painters. Variant negatives of the same subject have also proved important sources for understanding the dynamics of Evans's urban perception.

Supporting the close reading of Evans's photographs is a second level of analysis, concerning his visual culture and the context that shaped it. So far, Evans's literary ambitions and his occasional reference to Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Joyce have obscured the influence on his work of the transatlantic art of the 1910s and 1920s. In order to explore this topic, research has focused on "little magazines" such as *The Little Review*, *The Soil*, and *transition*, in which literary, visual, philosophical issues were discussed simultaneously, often as part of larger discussions on the emergence of an American art. Equally important was the circle of Evans's friends and mentors, beginning with Hanns Skolle, Stefan Hirsch, and later Ben Shahn, all of whom were painters with strong connections to European culture. Again, detailing the influence exerted on Evans's work by the vast cultural network of artists, galleries, museums, and magazines of the interwar period is at best a risky undertaking. By definition, all serious intellectuals develop their language and agendas from a complex reconsideration of past and present culture, and it is often unwise to try to pinpoint specific associations. Certain areas of this cultural background, however, have proved more significant than others, and this dissertation tries to expand the traditional understanding of Evans's aims beyond the romantic notion of the artist's originality.

In the photographic field, connections with the early work of Paul Strand have been mapped beyond Evans's known admiration for *Blind Woman*, 1916. Strong iconographic similarities with photographs by commercial photographers also active as independent

artists – such as Thurman Rotan and Martin Bruehl – suggest that the network of exchanges among New York photographers of the 1920s contributed to shape Evans's practice. An outstanding case is represented by the work of Percy Loomis Sperr and the photographic survey of New York that he assembled for the New York Public Library in the second half of the decade. Inferential evidence suggests that Evans (and most probably Berenice Abbott) was aware of Sperr's project and may even have collaborated with him, but again, the present state of research only allows for cautious speculation.

It is clear that Evans was largely aware of the language of modern architecture and the debate on the cultural meaning of the skyscraper that emerged at the end of the 19th century and progressed with the new generation of tall buildings in the 1920s. Many of Evans's photographs appear to reflect the ideas of Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, but also the basic notions on modern architecture expounded by Le Corbusier in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and in *Vers une architecture*. In addition to these publications of architects-photographers (Mendelsohn) and architects-painters (Le Corbusier), Evans seemed eager to consider the work of proper painters with a strong interest in architectural themes. Beginning with the Machine-Age Exposition of 1927, which opened in New York on the day of his return from his year-long sojourn in Paris, Evans had a chance to see firsthand all the major works of American post-Cubist and Precisionist painters depicting New York's urban environment. The figures of Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, Charles Sheeler, Stuart Davis, and possibly Niles Spencer stand out in this respect, even if only by association. Evans's photographs share some of the phenomenological concerns that these painters found in the modern city, although a substantial difference should be maintained between their respective choice of medium. Most important, Evans shared with several painters of the city the quest for an American version of modern art, one that was deeply rooted in the experience of everyday life and in the appreciation for material culture.

Further studies may lead to a fuller understanding of certain aspects of Evans's early work. A systematic analysis of his private letters and the reconstruction of his personal

library, for instance, can shed additional light on the meanings and chronology of his New York photographs. A better knowledge of Evans's first exhibitions of 1930–1932 is also needed in order to grasp the value he attached to the photographic sequence. Ongoing investigations on the underappreciated work of Percy Loomis Sperr seemed too conjectural to be fully included in this dissertation, but future work on his photographs, biography, and publications will hopefully provide new insight into Evans's ideas at the turn of the 1930s. Further connections may be detected in the early work of Berenice Abbott, as well as with the work of two eccentric photographers, Gretchen and Peter Powel, whose book *New York 1929* was published in Paris by the Black Sun Press, the same publisher of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, illustrated with photographs by Evans. From a thematic perspective, additional research on Evans's photographs of New York citizens, especially around 1933–1934, may contribute to a deeper understanding of his subsequent work, including the first section of *American Photographs* entirely devoted to this theme.

Significant aspects of Evans's intellectual biography, however, have been unearthed. Reading the Walker Evans Archive and all the available documents pertaining to Evans's early work, this dissertation has aimed to disclose the fundamental ideas about photography and the modern city embedded in photographs that may appear at first sight anodyne and unaccomplished. Looking beyond the strictures of art-historical classifications and generalizations, a close reading of the photographs strives to revive Evans's phenomenological perception of the modern urban environment. Uncovering the layered meanings of Evans's early work also provides a more secure background for his later accomplishments. Despite significant differences in style and subject matter, the core issues raised (if not always resolved) by Evans's New York project can be seen at work in his acclaimed masterwork – *American Photographs* – and in the portfolios on urban issues published in *Fortune* magazine in the 1950s and '60s. In fact, the urban environment of late-1920s New York was the testing ground for Evans's idea of a documentary style ambitiously suspended between the appreciation of American material

culture and "transcendent" observation. At its root lies the notion of photography as a *civil* practice, at the same time a respectful representation of its subjects, an act of preservation, and an intellectual statement open to further discussion in the cultural arena of the *polis*. At its core is also the idea of the photograph as an inherently urban text: the careful observation of the palimpsest of signs that organize our public space. The photograph, then, can be an invitation to take a stand amidst the chaotic accumulation of historical vestiges, power structures, and unconscious signs that shape our daily lives.

Equally important is the image of New York conveyed by Evans's visual text. This study has highlighted the crucial themes of New York singled out by the photographer in order to construct a plausible, and yet critical, representation of the modern metropolis. The city's skyline; the dizzy perspectives afforded by the tall building and the worm's-eye views from the bottom of the urban canyons; the productive structures of the machine age; the ephemeral spectacle of consumption and the exhibition of goods – these are the keys to Evans's interpretation of New York as a metaphorical city of the future, in which the opposites of construction and destruction, building and decay, ironically seem to coincide. Uninterested in a thorough survey of modern New York, Evans devised a symbolic geography of the metropolis: the Financial District, 42nd Street, Central Park South, but also Brooklyn and Gowanus, and later the waterfront of South Street and West Streets. If we compare this plan with the photographic books on New York published around that time, we fully realize how partial Evans's vision was: an unromantic, uncompromising, and "cruel" dissection (to borrow from Lincoln Kirstein) of the city's tissue. And if New York, as Thomas Bender has argued, is the quintessential modern city because it is an "unfinished city," then we might see Evans's incomplete project as the most fitting visual text of the modern metropolis in the incipient years of the Depression.

This dissertation's attempt to bring to historical attention a photographic body of work so far forgotten or marginalized advocates the importance of reestablishing possible connections between urban images and the "reality" they record. To put it

differently, it asserts the important link between an individual's world-view and the representations crafted by other urban actors, including architects, planners, artists, intellectuals, and, most importantly, the citizens who live and make the city. This type of study suggests, among other things, that all photographs, independent of their intellectual agenda or supposed aesthetic value, are in some way constituent elements of civic life. It also suggests that photography's documentary value is not an ontological condition, but rather that it is dependent on a work of reinterpretation expected from each subsequent generation and thus, potentially, from each citizen. Not only the physicality, but also the meaning of documentary photographs need to be preserved and occasionally restored. Historical work at its best is an act of restoration of the documentary value of the photograph, a process intended to recover vital knowledge about the facts, objects, people, ideas, and feelings that made possible that image and that may have been lost in the flux of time or erased by the violence of power. From this perspective, the photographs of New York taken by Walker Evans in the late 1920s can be seen as a viable model for a cultural history of the modern city, a type of history that values the photograph as personal observation and critical judgement, as opposed to uncritical illustration or rhetorical discourse.

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Architectural Record

Architectural Review

Architecture

The Arts

Broom

Creative Art

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