

ANTONELLO FRONGIA

Documentary vs. Vernacular

Clément Chéroux (ed.)
Walker Evans

Paris, Éditions
du Centre Pompidou,
2017, pp. 272
ISBN 9782844267658
€ 49,90

Over the past few decades, the reception of Walker Evans' work has grown through discrete phases. Everybody is familiar with the major MoMA retrospective organized by John Szarkowski in 1971, which was pivotal in revamping Evans' reputation worldwide and in canonizing his documentary photographs of the 1930s as 'modern art'. The talks and interviews Evans delivered in the following years – such as the conversation with Leslie Katz published in "Art in America," in which he made the now common distinction between photographic "documents" and "documentary style" – have become part and parcel of the critical discourse on the medium. After the artist's death in 1975, the Walker Evans Estate published and supported a number of books that further contributed to the international dissemination of his imagery, including *First and Last* (1978), Jerry L. Thompson's *Walker Evans at Work* (1982), Michael Brix and Birgit Mayer's *America* (1991), and Gilles Mora's *The Hungry Eye* (1993). Meanwhile, Lesley K. Baier, Jean-François Chevrier, Peter Galassi, Sarah Greenough, John Tagg, and Alan Trachtenberg (to name a few) authored penetrating essays on Evans' photographs and publications; in-depth biographies were written by Belinda Rathbone, Jerry Thompson, and especially James Mellow. A new phase in the understanding of Evans' work began in 1994, when Judith Keller compiled a systematic catalogue of his photographs in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, while the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired his archive. In 2000, scholarly studies carried out by Met curators Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman made it possible to assemble the first informed, comprehensive view of the artist's career. Two exhibitions and the digitization of Evans' archive further clarified the significance of his pioneering work of the 1930s, but also shed new light on his activity before and after the celebrated FSA period. To a greater or lesser degree, all the subsequent exhibitions can be seen as either recapitulations or elaborations of the groundbreaking analyses developed at the Met in the second half of the 1990s.

It is important to take into account this historiographical lineage when considering the Walker Evans retrospective that Clément Chéroux has recently mounted at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and which presents over 300 photographs together with documents, publications of Evans' work, paintings by his own hand, as well as exhibits from his collection of Americana. The stated rationale of the show is twofold. On one hand, this is hailed as the largest display of Evans photographs ever mounted in France: a long due tribute – one might say – to an artist whose work has greatly influenced European photographers, but mostly through reproductions rather than original prints. On the other hand, the exhibition is meant to offer a reconceptualization of Evans' career based on the idea of the 'vernacular'.

Chéroux – who has published a book entitled *Vernaculaires* (2013) and has served as the Pompidou's Chief curator of Photography for nine years before moving to the SFMoMA in 2016 – is possibly the best equipped to analyze this concept in a transatlantic perspective. In the exhibition catalogue, he refers to the Latin etymology *verna* (slave) to define the vernacular as anything that is useful, home-made, and peripheral to the values of 'high' culture: "Ici, il se définit selon trois

axes précis: sa fonction, son lieu et son esprit. Le vernaculaire est *utile, domestique et populaire*". Historically, Chéroux charts the American development of this idea by looking at three situations that affected Evans' cultural biography: the circle of young intellectuals (Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Alfred H. Barr, Lewis Mumford, Lincoln Kirstein) who promoted "Hound & Horn" magazine and the birth of the MoMA in the late 1920s; the work of cultural historian John A. Kouwenhoven, especially his book *Made in America. The Arts in Modern Civilization* (1948); and, later, Szarkowski.

According to these premises, the exhibition and the catalogue follow a thematic rather than a strictly chronological order, with two main sections centred, respectively, on the vernacular as a photographic "subject" (practical buildings, common tools, ordinary people) and a photographic "method" (supposedly derived from commercial rather than artistic practitioners); they are preceded by an introduction on Evans' early years and followed by a coda on "photography itself" (with pictures depicting other photographs, cameras or his own darkroom).

The exhibition layout – perhaps inspired by that of *American Photographs* (Evans' first MoMA show in 1938) – might have pleased the artist himself. Prints of varying sizes and frames are spaced unevenly on the wall – in lines, clusters, sometimes both – creating patterns of formal or semiotic associations; typewritten materials, magazines, and a monitor reproducing a slide projection are interspersed with original photographs; two entire rooms are devoted to Evans' collections of postcards, enamel plaques and road signs. At times the effort to avoid a more traditional type of presentation seems to prevail, and the sequencing of the photographs becomes quite elusive. Yet, because of the syncopated rhythm of the layout, the viewer is constantly prompted to reconsider each print and make new connections. This process can be rewarding on many levels. In a variant print of *Wooden Houses, Boston, 1930* (cat. p. 83), one may notice that Evans carefully framed the head of a young boy looking at the scene in the lower left corner of the photograph, only to crop it out in other versions, including the 1938 and 1962 editions of *American Photographs*. Two variant portraits of Allie Mae Burroughs taken in 1936 are mounted facing each other on opposite walls, forcing the viewer to re-enact the mental process of repeated observation that characterizes much of Evans' work, but also creating a think-piece that questions notions of authorship, subjecthood, and spectatorship. Also noteworthy is the amount of vintage prints in the exhibition, spanning almost fifty years, which extols Evans' penchant for a subtly 'graphic' type of printing, with rich contrasts and deep blacks that in today's standards seem at odds with the "documentary and anti-graphic" approach championed by Julien Levy's exhibition bearing this title in 1935.

The catalogue offers a series of writings by notable authors from both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to Chéroux's opening essay, topics include Evans' encounter with Kirstein in the early 1930s (Jerry L. Thompson), popular culture (Jeff L. Rosenheim), waste and decline (Julie Jones), magazine work (David Campany), Evans' modernist aesthetics (Didier Ottinger), his texts (Anne Bertrand), the functioning of his "eye" (Svetlana Alpers). While all these essays provide insightful points of entry into the artist's oeuvre, only some of them seem to acknowledge the preceding historiographical debate, or even consider Evans' evolving position within the cultural contexts in which he worked. (Among the interesting exceptions are Ottinger, Thompson, and Bertrand; the latter also edited a critical edition of the Evans/Katz interview, published separately on this occasion). An example of this is the discussion of Evans' first encounter with the theme of the vernacular, which is presented rather schematically as a consequence of his encounter with Kirstein and the work of Atget. A more nuanced reconstruction might have considered another key concept of the time, "folk art," as well as Holger Cahill's seminal exhibitions on this subject at the Newark Museum (1930) and the MoMA (1932), which were the first to present artisans and the artifacts they made for their "use and enjoyment" as the cornerstones of a truly American modern art. In this perspective, it is puzzling that the Paris exhibition devotes practically no attention to Evans' series on the "Victorian Houses"

(commissioned by Kirstein and shown at the MoMA in 1933 in parallel with the paintings of Edward Hopper, as discussed by Éric de Chassey in 2005) as a defining moment in the artist's appreciation of vernacular architecture.

But Chéroux's agenda, one suspects, lies elsewhere. As he writes, "Bien davantage que de 'style documentaire,' il serait donc plus juste de qualifier la démarche d'Evans de 'style vernaculaire'" (p. 12). By subsuming Evans' entire career under the rubric of the vernacular, Chéroux not only advances a bold reinterpretation of the artist's own notion of "documentary style," but also aims at revisioning the whole discourse on photography's documentality, beginning with Olivier Lugon's influential book on this subject (2001). Although largely implicit, this critical move is possibly the most significant contribution of the exhibition. Its merit lies in sidestepping the binary ontology of document and art (an increasingly problematic distinction in the digital era) in favor of an idea of the medium as a bottom up, socially shared, constantly re-mediated practice (in tune with recent web based trends). Yet to claim that Evans operated "selon des méthodes historiquement anti-artistiques" and countered "le 'style' [...] à un 'vernaculaire' agrégeant tout ce qui n'est pas de l'art" (p. 13) is to take the anonymity of Evans' work at face value and to miss the point of his conceptual stance – that conscious crafting of a stylish stylelessness that John Gossage once celebrated in his "appreciation of an artist who hides his hand". In fact, Evans was as much a critical observer of material culture as a conscious participant in the "transatlantic modernism" of the 1930s, that artistic milieu of painters, architects, writers, poets, and photographers who strove to develop a new American language in a dialectical interplay with the European avant-garde. Chéroux tackled precisely these issues in a show he co-curated in 2012, *Voici Paris. Modernités photographiques, 1920-1950*. Unfortunately, however, his present show is quite reticent about this juncture and in the end, by proposing a transhistorical notion of the vernacular, it does little to question the enduring myth of Evans' exceptionalism, based on the idea of a self-taught, purely visual, and monadic photographer. All of which, once again, raises the issue of the productive balance between the complexities of the archive and the authority of the museum.