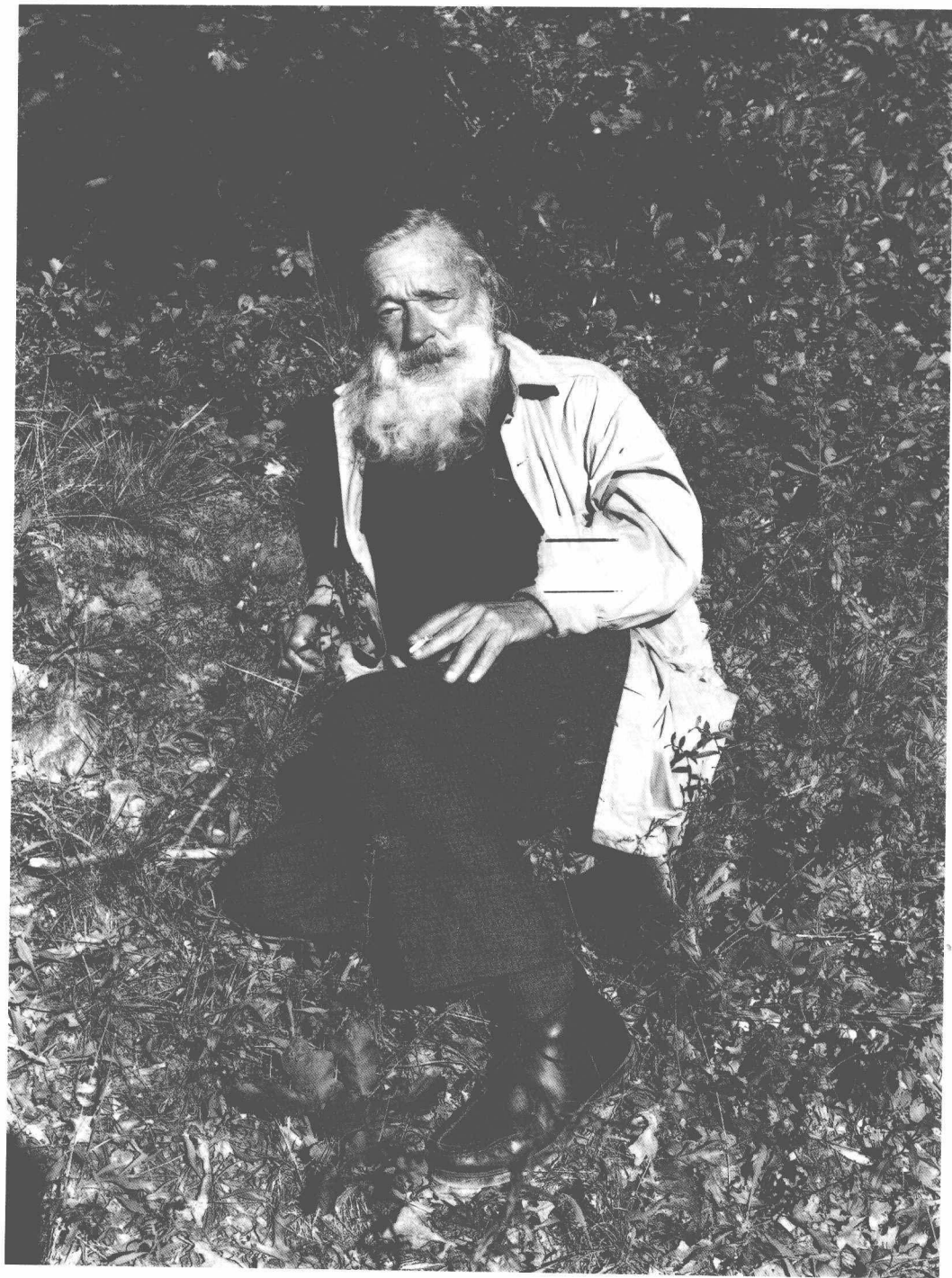


The Last Years of **WALKER EVANS**

Jerry L. Thompson

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Martha's Vineyard,
Massachusetts,
October, 1974

The Last Years of **WALKER EVANS**

a first-hand account by **Jerry L. Thompson**

with 35 illustrations, 8 in color



Thames and Hudson

All photographs not otherwise credited are by the author.

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for LESLIE KATZ

A A violent order is disorder; and

*B A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one.*

(Pages of illustrations.)

Wallace Stevens

SINCE HIS DEATH in 1975, much has been written about Walker Evans, but little attention has been directed to his final years. So far, students of this American artist have slighted, if not ignored, the events and work of his late life.

In reading posthumous accounts of Evans, I have often been struck – forcefully – that some essentials are missing: a sense of the presence of the man himself, with his complexity, contradictions, and many qualities, and also an accurate estimate of the subtlety and reach of his artistic work – particularly the work of the last three years, the part of his life I knew first-hand. For at least fifteen years I have been writing letters to students of Evans (as well as to some editors) in attempts to correct what I knew to be omissions or understood as misconceptions. As a recent letter grew to the length of a small essay, I decided simply to write out the story of the last years of his life myself, as I knew it.

Many other people were connected to Evans during the years I knew him, a number quite closely. I have not tried to compare my memories with theirs, or to ask about events I did not witness. Rather than attempt to sift and blend disparate memories into a smooth rounded account, I have chosen to rely on first-hand knowledge. I have consulted only the few notes I made at the time, letters I had received from Evans, a number of photographs, and my memory.

I have confined myself to events I took part in or heard about from Evans, opinions I remember forming at the time, and some broader conclusions I have been unavoidably drawn to over the years.

As self-reliant as it is, this essay (and its author) owe two large debts. The first is to John Hill, the friend chosen by Evans to be the executor of his estate, who regularly involved me in the plans for publishing and preserving Evans's work initiated by the estate during its twenty years of independent existence. Conversations with John Hill helped to keep my interest in Evans fresh, and – more importantly – his unsurpassed knowledge of the man and his work has greatly enlarged my own understanding of Evans as an artist.

The other large debt is to Maria Morris Hambourg and Jeff Rosenheim of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When they acquired the estate in 1994 they kindly invited me to look at the Polaroid SX-70 pictures made by Evans during the time I knew him. During several sessions in the Museum's print study room I had the great pleasure of re-seeing hundreds of pictures I first saw more than twenty years ago, as they were being made, most of which have not been available for viewing since.

One person's view cannot supply the whole story, perhaps not even the last word on the subject. But I saw a lot, and I was paying close attention. This account at least avoids the error of examining selected biographical details of Evans's late years while failing to take sufficient notice of the work he was doing at the time – a mistake, with the Evans I knew, comparable to failing to notice whether he was breathing. His main interest, his chief commitment, when I knew him, was to be an artist, as anyone would know who ever heard him say the word, stretching the first syllable to savor the resonance of the vowel, softening the *r* and gently nudging *ar* toward *ah*, his voice projecting an aura so pronounced as to be almost visible in the air.

IN THE FALL of 1973, when I began to teach at Yale, I was living in Walker Evans's Connecticut house in Old Lyme. As the end of summer had approached, Evans was preparing to leave on a trip to England, and I was staying on as long as possible in a rented room in Brooklyn, New York, where I was photographing, spending on 8 x 10 film what savings I had left from graduate school, and postponing making plans for housing in New Haven in the fall. My salary wouldn't start until after I began teaching.

Though I had known Evans for less than two years, we had been through a lot, and our friendship, at this time, was easy-going. He suggested that I could stay in his house rent-free – he would be away for much of September, anyway – and then I could find a place of my own later on, maybe a place in New Haven where he might visit overnight from time to time. He was officially retired by then from the university faculty – Yale had a mandatory retirement policy at that time – but drove the forty miles from Old Lyme into New Haven frequently.

My teaching job, that first year, was cobbled together from several small budget items, one of them a reduced version of the position left vacant by Evans's retirement. My schedule was consequently a little uneven, and on one or two days I had morning classes, afternoon appointments, and a late class that met after dinner. On those days I left Old Lyme early and wound up making the hour-long drive back late at night.

After Evans returned from England in late September, we shared his house and had frequent talks. Once I mentioned to him that on my late-night drives home I found I was too tired to think out anything at all that was complicated. I would dwell on some

unresolved question, mulling it over and over but unable to come to any conclusion. I was then 28 and was discovering for the first time that I could think better at the beginning than at the end of a long day.

In response, Evans asked me to imagine that I felt just that tired and muddled first thing in the morning on the best days of my life. That, he said, was what it felt like to be his age. He was then 69.

I MET WALKER EVANS in the fall of 1971 in New Haven, where I had gone for a graduate course in photography at the Yale School of Art. Evans was the senior figure there, and I had tried to meet him before actually enrolling; but he had never been available on a day when I was visiting. So in September 1971, after resigning a full-time job teaching sixth-graders in New York City and selling the photographer's studio I lived in, I finally came to meet the man I hoped would play a large role in my advanced education.

A few days after I arrived I learned that admission to Evans's class was not automatic, even for graduate students; he interviewed all prospective students before admitting them into his course. This news was not welcome; I had made large adjustments to be here to study with him, and I had already turned down another offer of admission. I reviewed my entire modest achievement in photography to prepare for this interview, rearranging the order of my prints in an attempt to make the strongest case for admission to his class. I was worried.

At the appointed day and hour I stood in a small outer office, next to the departmental secretary's desk, while Evans finished another interview out of my sight, in an inner conference room. I got a signal from the secretary to go in, but a second-year student jumped ahead of me, saying he wanted to say hello and ask "Walker how his summer was."

Already ridiculously overwrought, I was even further keyed up by this unexpected delay and the casualness with which it had been administered. My case of nerves was fueled by several years of wanting to do something serious in photography – something connected to some real world, not just my anonymous amateur

studio – and several months of wanting to do it here, at Yale, with Evans. When my time finally came I burst into the conference room where I saw a small, nervous-looking man dressed in a tweed jacket, sweater, and tie. He had a thermos and a cup of tea before him on the table, and he seemed vaguely afraid of something.

At his invitation I sat down, focussing all my attention on this long-awaited meeting. I must have displayed more excitement at this encounter than he (or anyone else) thought reasonable. I was ready to explode with words and sequenced prints as soon as he asked me about my proposed work for his class, but he didn't ask. Instead he astonished me by asking where I was in the university.

I was a graduate student, I said, amazed that he didn't know, since only four were admitted in photography each year.

Oh? He asked with faint interest, In what?

Evans in New Haven,
late 1971 or early 1972,
photographed by
John T. Hill



In what? In photography, I answered with growing anxiety. I didn't know they took graduate students in photography, he said conversationally, without any emphasis or surprise.

This remark routed all my preparations. When he asked whether the prints I had were for him to look at, I dumbly began to take the top off the 6-inch-thick box without giving my prepared pitch. The prints were in glassine envelopes, and I began to remove the first from its translucent sheath.

Oh man, I've seen enough, he said before the print was fully out of its envelope. Anyone who can print like that has a place in my class.

My interview was over.

I knew that Evans was an accomplished photographer – I had seen his pictures, and people I respected confirmed my admiration. My prior experience in graduate school led me

Evans talking to Yale
students, Norfolk, CT,
July, 1972



to expect that he would feel obliged to make a good photographer out of me, too.

My previous graduate professors, all scholars, had had methods for making us students into scholars. They devised exercises and learning experiences for us. They taught, and they told us what to read. Evans was different, and in class he was as elusive, even evasive, as he had been at my interview. Other faculty members taught things, many things new and of interest to me, but Evans's teaching was mostly conversation, and the conversation frequently led rather far away from photography. Many of the students in his class were Yale undergraduates, some from exotic backgrounds (one lived in a castle in Scotland), and many had traveled. Some had read. Evans tended to draw them out, encouraging them to talk about what they knew – which they did, readily.

I learned that, partly because of his big retrospective show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York earlier that year (1971), Evans's course was what was then known at Yale as a Celebrity Course. There were other such courses, and aggressive undergraduates tried to take as many of them as possible, liberally first-naming the instructors. Evans used his celebrity as a kind of armor, sitting passively inside his reputation while the Yalies chattered away. Other advanced students attended only irregularly, showing up from time to time with a small stack of prints to be admired by the undergraduates and (a little too readily, it seemed to me) by the professor. I sat in a corner and occasionally glowered.

After a few of the weekly meetings I noticed that Evans was never in a hurry to leave at the end of class. He would sit with two or three of the students, continuing to talk after the others left, sometimes, apparently, with great interest. I began to hang

around, too, and we talked a little. If he wouldn't teach me anything, at least I could observe him closely. I watched everything he did and said, and I think he noticed. Later on he flattered me by saying that he had been struck by my "intensity."

Evans was scheduled to provide a show that winter for the Yale University Art Gallery, and one of my graduate classmates, Melinda Blauvelt, was to be his assistant. She was to help with the selection and organization of the pictures, but he also needed other kinds of help – lugging boxes, mounting prints, and so on. My classmate suggested, generously, that I too might help. On the basis of this recommendation and our few conversations, Evans asked me if I would do a couple of things for him. I said yes, of course, and accepted his first assignment: to transport a heavy book press from his house to the school print-mounting area.

I can still see in my mind's eye the front porch of the Victorian ark I imagined he must live in. To my surprise the house he led me to was a low, angular structure built in the 1960s with the help of a Yale architect he had known. Though it incorporated such traditional American features as a row of half-pilot lights along one side of the ridgepole – an arrangement sometimes used in factory buildings of the nineteenth century – its spirit was modern. Evans toyed with the idea of calling it *Clerestory* in honor of its high windows.

The furniture I saw was mostly not modern. A corduroy-covered Victorian couch, a plain American hardwood dining table, some ladderback chairs, and a *papier-maché* tea table shared the rooms with eye-catching objects – handsome old instrument cases used as low tables in front of a loveseat, electrified kerosene lamps, a phrenological head and a ceramic hand on end tables. A rack of dark wall-mounted bookcases dominated the living room. Almost all the books were hardcover except for an

impressive row of paperback publications of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which filled the upper left shelf. There were no photographs or photographic paraphernalia in the living or dining rooms.

The press I was to transport to New Haven was in a large workroom separated from the rest of the house by a door. This studio was lighted from above by the half-pilots, and also by a row of large picture-type windows running the length of the room along the outside wall. The press was on a counter set against this row of windows, and to get to it, I had to thread my way carefully through stacks of Evans's artistic detritus. Prints mounted and unmounted, in boxes and loose stacks, lay on most of the surfaces. Negatives were mainly stored in envelopes in a number of metal boxes, but a few were out in the open. Some of the negative envelopes were marked with the sort of squiggle Evans would make when trying to get a felt-tip pen to started writing.

Other negatives were stored in expanding cardboard files or stashed in briefcases, sometimes without protective envelopes. There was a manuscript box, handmade by a student, containing twenty or thirty varying prints from one negative – test prints for a portfolio just completed. One wooden cabinet, resembling a nightstand, held a great stack of prints of African sculpture. As yet unpacked moving cartons from Evans's last New York address were stored under another counter. Recent collectings – signs and paper ephemera – were beginning to form a thin layer piled on top of everything else. A couple of suitcases were full of mail, some of it unopened.

Exploration of this cave of wonders would come later. That night I carried out the heavy press, along with an indelible impression of what I had glimpsed, and drove back toward New Haven, readjusting my appraisal of the man I was getting to know.

EVANS'S YALE SHOW was to have been called "Walker Evans: An Anthology of Taste," and was to have presented his selection of contemporary photographs made by others. A few selections had been made, some from among pictures students showed him in his seminar, but he apparently had no clear plan in mind. Some deadline must have passed, and the show became "Walker Evans: Forty Years," the second retrospective of his work in 1971. My contribution was to help bring boxes of prints in from Old Lyme, mount some new prints, and do a few other gofer chores requiring some but not much skill or experience.

I began to see more of Evans outside of class and discovered that he often had no one to dine with. Isabelle, his wife, was at the time living in their New York apartment and visited him some weekends. I also saw that he seemed not to have much to do a good deal of the time – apparently he did his photographing mainly on trips. I rarely saw him with a camera, though he had shown contact sheets of his previous summer's work – a trip to Nova Scotia of perhaps two weeks' length – to my class. I was confused by his performance as a teacher, puzzled by his activity, or lack of it, as an artist, but also excited by what I was seeing of his previous work, and frankly fascinated by what – and how much – I was seeing of him.

At his suggestion I had begun to address him as Walker. Walker Evans III introduced himself to strangers as Evans, I had noticed, and he had referred to himself in writing once or twice in the third person, also as Evans. I had met no one, however, who called him Evans or Mr. Evans. He told me with noticeable pride that he had been given a name that did not