

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
January 1988

WALKER EVANS: AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS January 19 - April 11, 1989

To celebrate its publication of the fiftieth-anniversary edition of Walker Evans's landmark book, American Photographs, The Museum of Modern Art presents an exhibition of photographs by Evans. Widely regarded as one of the most important and influential of all photography books, American Photographs has been long out of print. The exhibition, WALKER EVANS: AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS comprises approximately seventy original prints from the Museum's collection and is on view from January 19 through April 11.

The Museum first published American Photographs in 1938 and issued a second edition in 1962. On both occasions, the publication was accompanied by an exhibition of Evans's work. Peter Galassi, curator, Department of Photography, and organizer of the present exhibition, notes that "quite apart from Evans's remarkable pictures, the conception of the book was radical in itself; and Lincoln Kirstein's essay is one of the most brilliant pieces of on-the-spot art criticism in this century." The new edition reprints Kirstein's essay and concludes with a note by Galassi tracing the publication history of the book.

Traveling throughout the East and South in the early thirties, Evans photographed icons of ordinary America: the commercial environment, automobile culture, anonymous architecture, the citizen in the street. Straightforward, even austere in style, his pictures gave a new poetic power to bare fact. Collectively, they defined an image of essential America that has lost none of its original bite. Evans's work of the thirties, presented in stark and prototypical form in American Photographs, has had a profound impact not only on subsequent photography, but also on film, literature, and the visual arts.

- more -

In his bold essay, Lincoln Kirstein observed, "Walker Evans is giving us the contemporary civilization of eastern America and its dependencies as Atget gave us Paris before the war and Brady gave us the War between the States. . . . after looking at these pictures with all their clear, hideous and beautiful detail, their open insanity and pitiful grandeur, compare this vision of a continent as it is, not as it might be or as it was, with any other coherent vision that we have had since World War I. What poet has said as much? What painter has shown as much?" Kirstein concluded, "The power of Evans's work lies in the fact that he so details the effect of circumstances on familiar specimens that the single face, the single house, the single street, strikes with the strength of overwhelming numbers, the terrible cumulative force of thousands of faces, houses and streets."

When it first appeared in 1938, American Photographs was a new kind of book. Each of the eighty-seven photographs stands alone on the page, facing a blank page. In the carefully organized sequence, the pictures comment upon each other, building a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Neither an exhibition catalogue nor a compendium of illustrations, the book presents itself as self-sufficient work of creative imagination.

While the present exhibition does not attempt to recreate the 1938 show, the new publication scrupulously follows the first edition of American Photographs. Eighty-seven new duotone plates, all but a handful from original prints, emulate the clarity and legibility of the original letterpress reproductions.

Impresario, scholar and writer, Lincoln Kirstein is best known for his leading role in the development of ballet in the United States. He was a founder and first director of the School of American Ballet and served as general director of the New York City Ballet. Among his extensive writings on

the visual arts are several important essays on photography, including the essay on Walker Evans in American Photographs and another on Henri Cartier-Bresson, published by The Museum of Modern Art in 1947.

After it closes in New York, WALKER EVANS: AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS will be shown at Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania (October 1 - November 26, 1989). An international tour will follow.

* * *

PUBLICATION American Photographs. Fiftieth-anniversary edition. Afterword by Lincoln Kirstein. 208 pages. 87 duotone plates. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Clothbound, \$40.00; paperbound, \$18.95; available in the Museum Store. Distributed by Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company, Boston. January 1989.

No. 2

For further information or photographic material, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.