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### Two New Books on Alfred Stieglitz

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## Two New Books on Alfred Stieglitz

## Reviews and Discussion

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**Sara Greenough and Juan Hamilton, eds.** *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs & Writings*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983. 248 pp., ill. \$75.00.

**Reviewed by Bonnie Yochelson**  
Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

The Alfred Stieglitz exhibition, seen at the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the Art Institute of Chicago, is accompanied by without doubt the best publication on Stieglitz yet to appear in print. The magnificently produced, oversize book presents Stieglitz's photographs with a fidelity and elegance comparable to his own epoch-making journal, *Camera Work*. Sara Greenough's text—a short essay and a selection of Stieglitz's writings on photography, both heavily annotated—constitute the most succinct and sensitive presentation of Stieglitz's ideas to date. More problematic, however, is Greenough's claim that "the purpose of the exhibition and catalogue is to demystify Alfred Stieglitz." What is the Stieglitz myth, and how does this publication promote or dispel it?

For Alfred Stieglitz, understanding modern art was a test of one's strength of character and spiritual resources. Those who visited his art galleries—"291" (1905–1917), The Intimate Gallery (1925–1929), and An American Place (1929–1946)—or subscribed to *Camera Work* implicitly accepted Stieglitz's challenge: are you superficial, opportunistic, and conventional, or are you willing to consider what is new, sincere, and difficult? Stieglitz worked unsparingly to isolate and elevate works of art from ordinary life; hence the utter simplicity and refinement of his gallery spaces and the perfectionistic craft and design of *Camera Work*. He put his heart and soul, not to mention his material resources, into the challenge, and he expected no less from others. Because of his militancy and his personal magnetism, a loyal following emerged, and from the following came the myth of Stieglitz as prophet of modern American painting, as father of modern photography, as eccentric storyteller and ascetic brooder—in short, as romantic hero.

The first of several attempts to capture Stieglitz's greatness for posterity was the 1934 tribute, *Alfred Stieglitz and America, A Collective Portrait*, edited by Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul Rosenfeld, and Harold Rugg, and published on the occasion of Stieglitz's seventieth birthday. In 1944 Dorothy Norman organized an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art of Stieglitz's works and his collection. In 1966 Herbert Seligmann wrote *Alfred Stieglitz Talking*, a collection of anecdotes based, like

Norman's text, on notes of encounters with the aging Stieglitz. Aperture, the fine art photography publishing firm, has made the Stieglitz myth widely available to the broader-based, young photography audience that developed in the 1970s: in 1973 Aperture published Dorothy Norman's adulatory *Alfred Stieglitz, A Modern Seer*, available in 1983 in paperback; in 1976 it published a smaller Stieglitz monograph for its History of Photography series, introduced by Norman; and in 1979 it reprinted the 1934 *Collective Portrait*. For readers such as myself, who are too young to smell the gunpowder from the battle for modern art and who cannot animate the famous image of the black-caped, shaggy-haired man with piercing eyes and sculptured lips, these books are tedious and frustrating. Stieglitz is after all gone, and their nostalgia cannot take root anew.

Georgia O'Keeffe, Stieglitz's widow, has taken a different approach, best summarized in her own words:

For me he was much more wonderful in his work than as a human being. I believe it was the work that kept me with him—though I loved him as a human being. I could see his strengths and weaknesses. I put up with what seemed to me a good deal of contradictory nonsense because of what seemed clear and bright and wonderful.

O'Keeffe's lack of hero worship and her deep skepticism about art criticism has had a lasting effect on Stieglitz's reputation. In her management of his estate, O'Keeffe has hindered access to his papers and promoted access to his works. She created the "key set," numbering roughly 1,600, of Stieglitz's photographs given to the National Gallery, and she enlarged Stieglitz's gift of twenty-seven photographs for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to sixty-nine. These gifts spawned two exhibitions: one in Washington in 1958 and one in Boston in 1965. O'Keeffe's secretary, Doris Bry, who helped with the dispersal of the estate, wrote a short essay on Stieglitz which was included in both the 1958 catalog and the more sumptuous 1965 publication. While O'Keeffe has unabashedly promoted and protected Stieglitz's critical fortunes, her stress on the works rather than the man distinguishes her efforts from others'.

In 1978 The Metropolitan Museum sponsored an exhibition of Stieglitz's portraits of O'Keeffe, which she selected; she wrote the short catalog essay and, assisted by Juan Hamilton, supervised the production of the book. Here O'Keeffe had the opportunity to present Stieglitz as she saw fit: in a large format, luxury book with excellent reproductions and a short, informative, extremely personal but unromanticized text. Her intention, like Stieglitz's in *Camera Work*, was to create the opportunity to experience great art, to test the viewer's powers of artistic feeling in the belief that Stieglitz's works command the authority of great art. There is no misplaced nostalgia here.





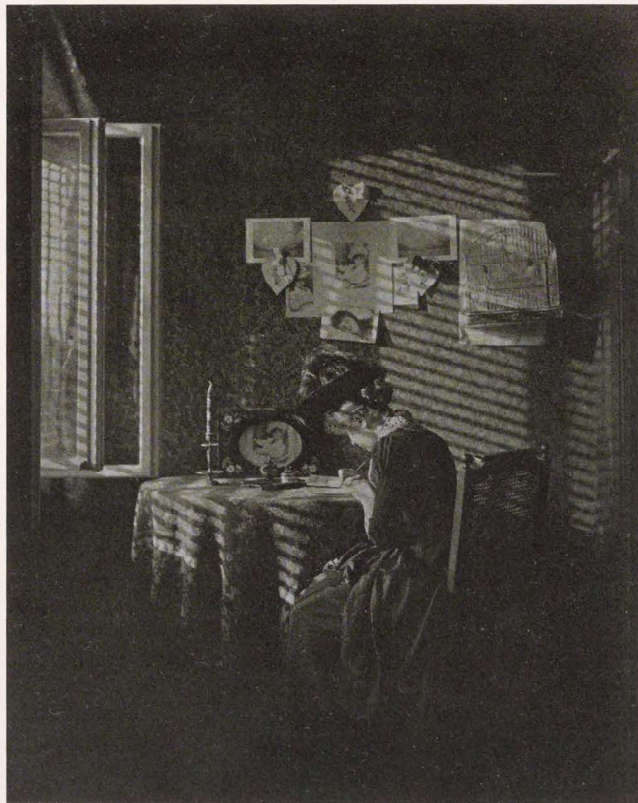
**Figure 1** Alfred Stieglitz. "Georgia O'Keeffe," 1920 (?). Gelatin silver print, 8¼ × 5¼ in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1980.

The Greenough-Hamilton book is a more ambitious effort in the same spirit. Although O'Keeffe was further removed from the actual creation of the show and book, her imprint is clear. Hamilton's co-authorship—he shared the task of choosing the photographs and oversaw the making of the plates—is one link, and the book, even more beautifully made than the Metropolitan catalog, is a virtual pendant: the two share the same size, color, design, typeface, and printing. The text is short, again in the interest of allowing Stieglitz's work to stand on its own; and Stieglitz the "great talker" and theorizer is presented through a selection of his own words. Greenough—who has cataloged the key set of photographs, written a thesis on Stieglitz's writings, and published an important interpretation of Stieglitz's Lake George photographs—was uniquely qualified to correct in the extensive notes the considerable misinformation about Stieglitz and to make the unavoidably interpretive selection of his writings. Like the Metropolitan catalog, this book, if given the time and concentration, yields to the reader a sense of Stieglitz's greatness in a way that earlier publications have failed to do. For those impatient with the Stieglitz myth, it is convincing of his importance, certainly as an artist, and even as a personality. By virtue of its accuracy and lack of romantic hyperbole, the book does in a limited sense demystify Stieglitz. However, only through critical distance rather than empathetic intimacy will he be fully demystified. The Greenough-Hamilton book stands as the definitive Stieglitz testimonial, not as the definitive critical evaluation.

Greenough's contribution, while fulfilling the requirements of a testimonial, makes considerable progress toward a new, more analytical approach. Her work, in large part masked by the book's format and virtually ignored by reviewers, deserves special attention. Stieglitz's life is usually divided into three distinct chapters: his early photographic career, including his leadership of the Photo-Secession (1890s–1910); his sponsorship of modern art at "291" (1910–1917); and his later photographic career of the 1920s and 1930s. The first period has been repeatedly discussed by photographic historians, the second by art historians concerned with the introduction of modern art to America, and the third by literary historians interested in Stieglitz's friendships with William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Sherwood Anderson. Greenough's accomplishment is to integrate these three approaches, stressing Stieglitz's unflagging and passionate struggle to forge a new "idea of photography"—an idea consonant with and nourished by avant-garde painting and art theory.

Unfortunately, Greenough's unity of vision is splintered into four separate parts of the book: the introduction, the notes to the introduction, the selection of





**Figure 2** Alfred Stieglitz. "Sun Rays—Paula, 1889," 1916. Platinum print,  $9\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.

writings, and the notes to the writings. The short introductory text, printed in the large typeface of a school primer and written in the simple, declarative style of received knowledge, looks perfunctory; its subtle arguments only become clear in the notes. The selected writings, the most original part of the book, are relegated to the back, after the illustrations, hidden as if a mass of pedantic documentation. In fact, this selection reveals with a new force Stieglitz's evolution from conventional naturalist photographer to radical crusader and from innovator to self-absorbed pessimist.

The chopping up and distribution of information into four compartments dissipates Greenough's achievement. A typical example is her discussion of Kandinsky. Stieglitz was preoccupied with fusing the theory of abstraction with the practice of photography, an inherently mimetic medium. In the introduction Greenough correctly connects Kandinsky's idea of art as the "outward expression of inner meaning" to Stieglitz's belief in photography's potential as an expressive art. This simple correlation is all the discursive text permits, but in parentheses Greenough

supports the link with two important facts: an excerpt from Kandinsky's book *On the Spiritual in Art* appeared in *Camera Work*, and Stieglitz bought the only work by Kandinsky in the Armory Show. In the introduction's notes, Greenough speculates on the exact point of contact between Kandinsky's ideas and Stieglitz's circle, and the reader is directed to the selected writings. There one finds an excerpt from a letter in which Stieglitz justifies his purchase of the Kandinsky, stating that while Kandinsky was "not the master like Cézanne or Picasso," his work was "possibly the most important feature in the whole [Armory] show." Only in the notes to the writings does Greenough feel free, finally, to discuss the more general affinity of Stieglitz's and Kandinsky's artistic ideas and their shared symbolist roots. There she cites correspondence in which a Kandinsky show was planned at "291," and she discusses the secondary literature on Kandinsky's influence in America. A similar trail of facts and ideas could be reconstructed for Stieglitz's interest in Picasso and Henri Bergson, or his relationships with Marius de Zayas, Edward Steichen, and Sadakichi Hartmann, as key players in Stieglitz's intellectual development. (Only Max Weber is given short shrift.) But running the obstacle course of this fractured text is worth the effort.

Another example of the book's hidden treasure is Greenough's treatment of 1917, a major turning point in Stieglitz's life. While the years 1910–1917 are usually understood as an incubation period between Stieglitz's nineteenth-century pictorialist and twentieth-century modernist styles, the full impact of the human drama of Stieglitz's sense of total defeat and phoenix-like rise in the 1920s is reenacted and amplified in Greenough's notes and selections. In her notes on this "very bleak period for Stieglitz," Greenough describes his life crisis at age fifty-three: the Armory Show, the development of the Arensberg and Mabel Dodge salons, and the appearance of the little arts magazines eclipsed "291"'s avant-garde function; *Camera Work*, down to thirty-seven subscribers, was increasingly difficult to print in Germany; with the war, Kodak discontinued platinum paper, Stieglitz's preferred medium; U.S. anti-German sentiment dealt Stieglitz a personal blow and led to his break with Steichen; he also broke with de Zayas; and his twenty-five-year marriage ended, causing financial as well as emotional strain. These notes supplement a passage from a letter to O'Keeffe:

I have decided to rip 291 to pieces after all—I can't bear to think that its walls which held your drawings & the children's should be in charge of any one else but myself. . . . No the walls must come down—& very soon—in a few days.—So that I am sure they're down—Others should move in & build anew. . . .



Greenough ends this vivid description with an analysis of Stieglitz's photograph "The End of 291," a still life featuring a wooden sculpture of a male figure to which Stieglitz added a sword and gauze headdress. She writes:

[W]ith its piles of burlap and the stacks of *Camera Work* . . . [this photograph] is a document of the end of 291 and Stieglitz's destruction of those rooms. It is also one of his most overtly symbolic photographs: with the bandaged bust of Stieglitz's father in the upper right and the framed pictures turned to the wall, it is a comment on Stieglitz's attempt to bring art to America. For it is clear . . . that he saw himself as the warrior who had tried, and failed, to get Americans to accept art as an integral part of their lives.

The scent of symbolic meaning often pervades Stieglitz's photographs, but Greenough's intimate knowledge of his thinking and works produces many new readings such as this one—so simple and so obvious, once articulated.

Yet another especially creative and convincing interpretation, again found in the notes to the writings, concerns a ca. 1933 photograph of the "Little House," a small building on the Stieglitz family property at Lake George that in 1927 Stieglitz made into a darkroom.

. . . it cannot be merely coincidental that Stieglitz included his shadow in the act of photographing—of making a negative image—which, in the same darkroom being photographed, would be turned into a positive print. Even the moon, usually associated with night and darkness, echoes this positive/negative process. This work is, at one and the same time, a symbolic portrait of Stieglitz the photographer and an homage to the process of photography.

Greenough's analysis bears comparison with Rosalind Krauss's well-known discussion of Stieglitz's 1889 photograph, "Sun Rays—Paula," in which Krauss speculates that Stieglitz's portrait of a girlfriend contains multiple references to the characteristics of the photographic medium itself. Ironically, Krauss's excellent article has established her reputation as a Stieglitz expert, while Greenough's interpretations in this book, just as penetrating and more numerous, have thus far been overlooked.

While the choppy presentation of the book has required that most of her ideas be squeezed into the notes, Greenough does contribute one major theme to our understanding of Stieglitz's achievement. Stieglitz's importance and the unity of his work have rested on his theory and practice of straight photography, the belief that photography must exploit its ability to describe external appearance and that the photographer's creativity lies not in darkroom manipulation but in the composing of the image—in the tak-

ing, not the making, of the photograph. Greenough has deliberately avoided the term "straight photography" and instead has relied on Stieglitz's own phrase, "idea of photography." The advantages of this approach are twofold: it avoids confusion of Stieglitz's evolving theory with what straight photography came to mean for the younger generation of Strand, Weston, and Adams; and it encompasses the intellectual complexity of Stieglitz's wrestling with modernist art theory.

The rewards of Greenough's approach are reaped in her stunning discussion of Stieglitz's monumental projects of the 1920s and 1930s—the O'Keeffe composite portrait; the cloud studies, or *Equivalents*; and the skyscraper series. Superficially, these projects appear very different: a collaborative portrait; a series of abstract compositions of sky, sun, and clouds; and a cool, precisionist, uninhabited vision of New York skyscrapers. Greenough unites the three by invoking the early influence of Bergson on Stieglitz's thinking and the importance of growth and change in his work:

The presence of change unites the 1930s photographs of New York with both the O'Keeffe portrait and the *Equivalents*. By changes in a series of photographs of O'Keeffe, Stieglitz documented her physical as well as psychological evolution. By variations in images in a series of photographs of clouds he illustrated the flux of his emotions. And by conflicts between natural forces—the contrasts of light and dark tones, shapes of clouds that collide and merge in the sky—he created an abstract equivalent of emotional tension and spiritual conflict. The later photographs of New York are not the blatantly subjective expression the *Equivalents* are, but neither are they dispassionately formal. While they are representational images, they do not abandon the idea that photography could embody subjective expression. By contrasting the beauty of the skyscrapers with their unremitting growth, Stieglitz made the buildings symbolic not only of the continuous change of New York, but of change itself as a principle of all being.

There is, however, a disadvantage to Greenough's approach, and her avoidance of the terms "straight photography" and "modernism" are symptomatic. After all is said and done, the simple fact is that Alfred Stieglitz invented the modernist theory of straight photography. In his search for fundamental principles inherent in his chosen medium, he shared with Gropius or Malevich or Matisse the establishment of an artistic *tabula rasa* upon which to build a new art. These pioneers participated in what Stieglitz himself called "an actual revolution going on in painting, just as the spirit of revolution is working through all the world." What has been assumed, rather than analyzed, is Stieglitz's influence as the "father of straight photography." He is understood, very loosely, as the first in a long line of straight photographers—leading



from Strand to the f64 group of the '30s to the photo-journalists of the '40s and the "snapshot" school of the '50s and '60s—who adhered to a set of "fundamental principles inherent in the medium." In fact, with the passage of time, Stieglitz shared less and less with his "protégés." He believed in the creation of the straight print as a precious object of art and as an expression of one's spiritual life, far from the taint of commercialism. Although he stressed the moment of photographic exposure, his compositions have nothing to do with "decisive moment" photography that relies on the forced relationships of disparate, unrelated objects for its meaning. His synthesis of modernist thought and photographic practice, while producing a great, perhaps *the* great, body of modern photographic work, is in fact quite idiosyncratic in the context of the '20s and '30s, which saw the development of photography for advertising, documentary, and propaganda purposes.

Stieglitz's work, which has been only tentatively considered in relation to the painters of his own circle, also bears closer comparison with European painters. Broadly speaking, the Lake George landscapes conform to the German romantic tradition; the *Equivalent*s share a good deal with Kandinsky's *Improvisations*; the portraits of the '20s suggest the directness and meticulous description of New Objectivity portraiture; and his choice of O'Keeffe as a primary subject recalls Picasso's similar preoccupation—both artists labored under the shadow of the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*. These off-the-cuff associations suggest a fresh approach to Stieglitz's accomplishments. His insistence on the distinctness of photography from other arts and on his "American-ness" has obscured his affinities with European modernism and forced his affinities with younger American photographers. The next step in understanding Stieglitz—a step beyond the scope of the Greenough-Hamilton book—is to demystify Stieglitz by removing him from his Olympian isolation and reassessing his place among European modernists and American photographers.

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**William Innes Homer.** Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession. A New York Graphic Society Book. Boston: Little, Brown, 1983. 180 pp., 102 black-and-white ills. \$34.00.

**Reviewed by Kenneth Finkel**  
The Library Company of Philadelphia

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Alfred Stieglitz remains a cult figure for modernists in art and photography eighty years after the first issue of *Camera Work*. William Homer continues to carry Stieglitz's torch; this is his sixth publication on the photographer, editor, and art impresario. Much of our attraction to Stieglitz is that he was a heroic figure with tremendous vision and unmatched energy. With the force of his own will, Stieglitz refined the largely unformed amateur photographic community in the United States. By the beginning of 1902, he had consolidated some of the interests in American art photography—called pictorial photography—into a loosely knit organization called the Photo-Secession. Though its members did not meet regularly for the first two years, and after that only during monthly dinners at a popular French restaurant in New York, they assembled successful exhibitions in prestigious galleries across the United States. *Camera Work*, the sumptuous, independent journal "devoted to the furtherance of modern photography," sprung from Stieglitz's mind. "He masterminded *Camera Work*," writes Homer, "and used it unashamedly as a vehicle for his own ideas." As the journal and the organization grew and became stronger and closer, Stieglitz shepherded photography to new aesthetic heights. Homer tells this intricate story concisely and in detail.

It is unclear whether the book is intended to be a partial biography of Stieglitz or an overview of the Photo-Secession. We find Stieglitz's early years discussed at length, though his later years are barely mentioned. His death date is not to be found in the text. If the book is an overview of the Photo-Secession, it falls short of being comprehensive. The sixteen chapters and 158 pages of heavily illustrated text are packed with terse essays. Many of the photographers who receive special treatment—Gertrude Käsebier, Clarence White, Edward Steichen, Anne Brigman, and Alvin Langdon Coburn—have received attention before. Other, less press-prone members of the Photo-Secession's core group—John G. Bullock, William B. Dyer, Edmund Stirling, and others—again receive only a passing glance. An excuse for this brevity may be that the publication of this book accompanied a traveling exhibition organized by the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. But some recent exhibition catalogs resemble telephone books, and it is time that such a thorough



guide to turn-of-the-century photography be published.

Stieglitz can be credited with the founding of the Photo-Secession, though he did not create the conditions that made its founding possible. In the 1880s and 1890s, there was an amateur movement in Europe and America to raise the standards of photography. At first, exhibitions included any and all submissions—there could be thousands—and hardly a competent photographer left without a prize. This brand of exhibition gave way, in the late 1890s, to shows of fewer prints selected by a jury before hanging. Salons, as they were called after similar efforts in Europe, were annual events at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1898 to 1901. No prizes were given; selection was the sole honor. Robert S. Redfield, president of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, invited Stieglitz to become a juror for the first of these, and *Camera Notes*, which Stieglitz edited, carried a glowing review. It was called "the most remarkable photographic display ever shown to an American public."

Only where Stieglitz is central to the evolution of modern photography should he be placed at center stage. Where he is not central to it, he should remain in the wings. Before 1902, when the Philadelphia Salons were defunct and the Photo-Secession and *Camera Work* were new and fresh, Stieglitz is a supporting actor. But there is no heroic figure for that earlier time. If we are ever to understand photography before modernism, we must shift from a search for heroes. The history of photography is neither simple nor straightforward, but it is rich.

"The concept of amateur photography," writes Homer, "was something entirely new in the mid-1880s, and it radically changed photographic history in a way that earlier practitioners could never have foretold." When the dryplate negative was first marketed in the early 1880s, amateurism permeated American life. But from the beginnings of photography, and especially during its nascent period, scientists, artists, tradespeople, and dilettantes defined the contours of the medium's potential. European societies—the Calotype Club of Edinburgh, founded in 1842, and the Royal Photographic Society of London and the Société Héliographique of Paris, both founded in 1852—were models for American versions. Members of the American Photographical Society (New York, 1859) and the Photographic Society of Philadelphia (1862) enjoyed the social nature of their organizations at dinner parties, through the exchange of prints and in publications. In the journals of the same period, many of which were organs of the societies, debates about lenses, printing papers, and exhibitions were carried on. And a few of the personalities of the early period, such as Charles Wagner Hull in New York and S. Fisher Corlies in

Philadelphia, were active into the 1880s. Redfield learned photography from Constant Guilloû, who was the first president of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia.

Amateurism persisted long before the Photo-Secession arrived on the scene. In fact, the organizational triangle of club, journal, and exhibition, which Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession so carefully abided by, was a form derived from traditions in amateurism. When Stieglitz is seen in this broader historical light, his heroic stature diminishes and his accomplishments seem more understandable. With such perspective, the turn-of-the-century photographic community can be seen independently of its own publicity hype.

The piles of journals filled with mundane discourses and the dusty boxes of old albums in attics are finally getting their due from several scholars. They will assemble widely dispersed collections, sift through materials already in libraries and museums, and tell the story of premodern photography. *Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession* is a point of departure for historians to search out the unvarnished facts of this near-epic chapter in the history of photography.

**John T. Hill, ed.** Walker Evans at Work. With an essay by Jerry L. Thompson. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. 256 pp. \$18.95.

**Reviewed by Stuart Liebman**  
Queens College, C.U.N.Y.

In one of the most famous passages in his voluminous correspondence, Flaubert wrote:

An artist must be in his work like God in creation, invisible and all powerful. He should be everywhere felt, but nowhere seen. Furthermore, art must rise above personal emotions and nervous susceptibilities. It is time to endow it with pitiless method, with the exactness of the physical sciences.

In the great French novelist's severe injunction, a would-be writer, now widely regarded as one of the central figures in twentieth-century American photography—Walker Evans—found his own artistic credo. The consequences for Evans's development as an artist, as well as for the evolution of photographic practice and criticism in the United States during the past half century, have been substantial, but at least until recently, insufficiently analyzed. In 1983, at least