

OPENING REMARKS FOR
'WERBUNG (ADAPTED FOR USE)',
haubrok foundation,
29. 04 - 26. 06. 2021

Stand In

A few empty Coca-Cola bottles WERE left for the sweepers.

This is Beaumont Newhall's recollection. Walker Evans left behind a few empty Coca-Cola bottles and some slivers of prints for the sweepers—and, perhaps, for Newhall. The photographer had asked the librarian to provide him with a large worktable and a paper cutter. These were the tools that he would need to prepare American Photographs, the first monographic exhibition of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was September 1938. There was no Department of Photography at the Modern. The librarian was in charge, sort of.

Evans left behind scraps of his work: the edges of his prints as well as the evidence of their handling. Several of the one hundred photographs that he had selected for the exhibition were mounted on boards, cropped at the edges, and glued directly to the wall. The photographer disliked showing his photographs under glass. This is Helen Levitt's recollection. Evans's darkroom assistant at the time, Levitt also recalled that the photographer washed his prints in the bathtub, leaving them on the side to dry.

The Coca-Cola bottles are not important; the need to recount them is. By recounting them, they become like the slivers of paper. They announce Evans's presence. Or, more to the point, they stand in its place, like an empty pair of shoes.

Recollections make the record. They help to produce the silences that allow the record to speak—allow for histories of photography to be written such that Walker Evans is guaranteed a prominent place in them. Evans's handling of his prints is unorthodox if an orthodoxy needs to be established. And it will, over and over again. It will be crafted from the stuff that is left behind for the sweepers and the librarians.

Few recall that the idea for a book of "American photographs" came first, even though this makes sense. Preparing photographs for pages was what Evans had been doing since the early 1930s. By 1938, he had already travelled to Alabama with James Agee for Fortune, and his photographs of Communist campers had been printed like a strip of film down the outer edge of a page in that business magazine.

The exhibition was not the main event. It was publicity for the printed matter—the eighty-seven photographs laid out one after another on the pages of American Photographs. This story does not dislocate the institution—push it out of the frame. It dislocates the need for one story. This is also the lesson of Evans's work, of his pages: the story told by and about any sequence of photographs is provisional.

There is matter: scraps, anecdotes, recollections, strings of words and dates, some of which are wrong.

There is the stuff that is left behind. Once bound or boxed up, it is ready to be opened.

Welcome.