



Walker Evans. *Subway Portrait*. 1938–41. Detail of plate 312

Evans's subway photographs of 1938–41 are a bundle of contradictions. They describe people as individuals, and in that fundamental sense the pictures are portraits. But each person is presented as a single unit in a potentially infinite series, and the environment could hardly be more impersonal. Unlike most photographic portraits, these exclude any possibility of exchange between sitter and photographer (and thus between sitter and viewer). On the contrary, the intimacy of the pictures depends upon their subjects' utter lack of awareness of the photographer. That intimacy is in itself contradictory: Evans's subway portraits address the deepest of inner secrets, only to assert that they are incommunicable.

When eighty-nine of the photographs were published in a book, in 1966, they were introduced by a text that James Agee had written in 1940, before Evans had completed the series. Agee observed that every person "has a wound and nakedness to conceal, and guards and disguises by which he conceals it. Scarcely ever, in the whole of his living, are those guards down."¹ But they are down, Agee implied, in Evans's portraits.

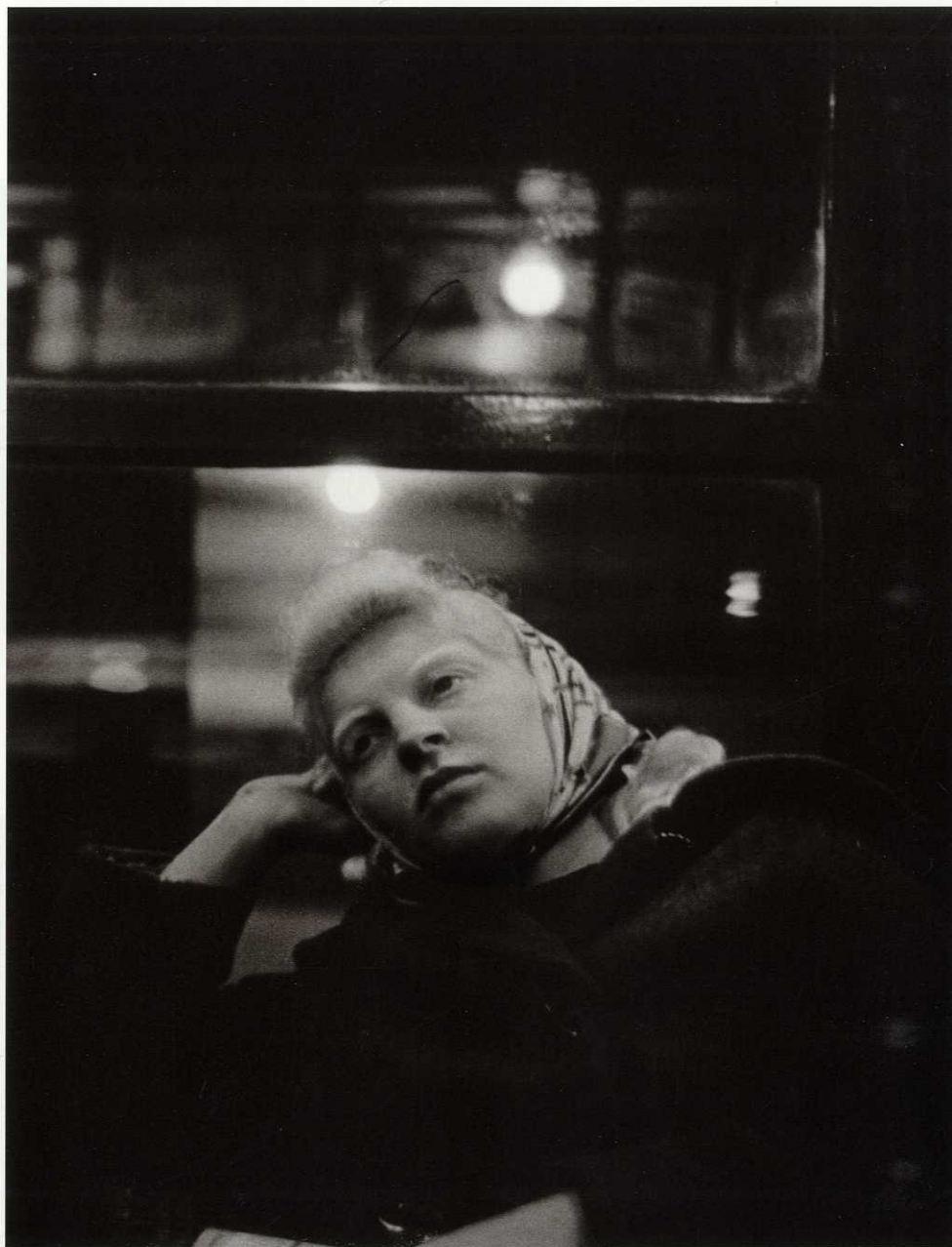
Evans himself drafted five different introductions to the book, and in each one he took an approach very different from Agee's. One of the drafts concluded, "Whoever chooses to decide from [these pictures] that people are wonderful or that what America needs is a political revolution is at liberty to do so."² This gem of sardonic wit is the true voice of Evans. But so, too, are the photographs themselves, and surely their author had not failed to see in them what Agee saw. It is no insult to Agee to suggest that Evans simply declined to substitute his own emotions for the emotions of his subjects—or of his audience.

The reserve of Evans's subway portraits is consistent with the whole of his aesthetic, but their intimacy invites us to consider the rest of his work from an angle that might not otherwise come to mind. The student of civilization has no need to examine the life of any individual person, but the study of what people share does not necessarily imply indifference to what they do not. One might say that in all of his work Evans explored the relationship between the two, without ever expecting to resolve it; certainly many of the artists who have learned from his example have attempted such an exploration. His friend Diane Arbus once said, "What I'm trying to describe is that it is impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's. . . . That somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own."³

1. James Agee, "Introduction," in Evans, *Many Are Called* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), n.p.
2. All five of Evans's drafts were published in John T. Hill and Jerry L. Thompson, eds., *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 160–61.
3. Diane Arbus, quoted in Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel, eds., *Diane Arbus* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1972), p. 2.



302. Edward Hopper. *East Side Interior*. 1922



303. Walker Evans. *Subway Portrait*. 1938-41



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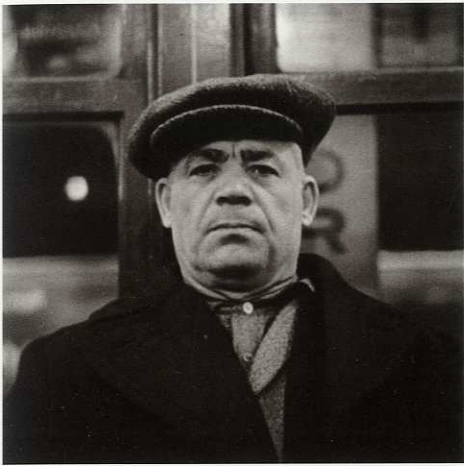
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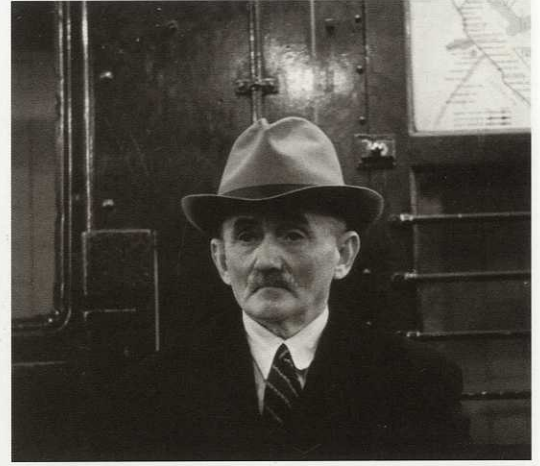
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304-313. Walker Evans. Subway Portraits. 1938-41



313.



314. Harry Callahan. *Chicago*. 1950



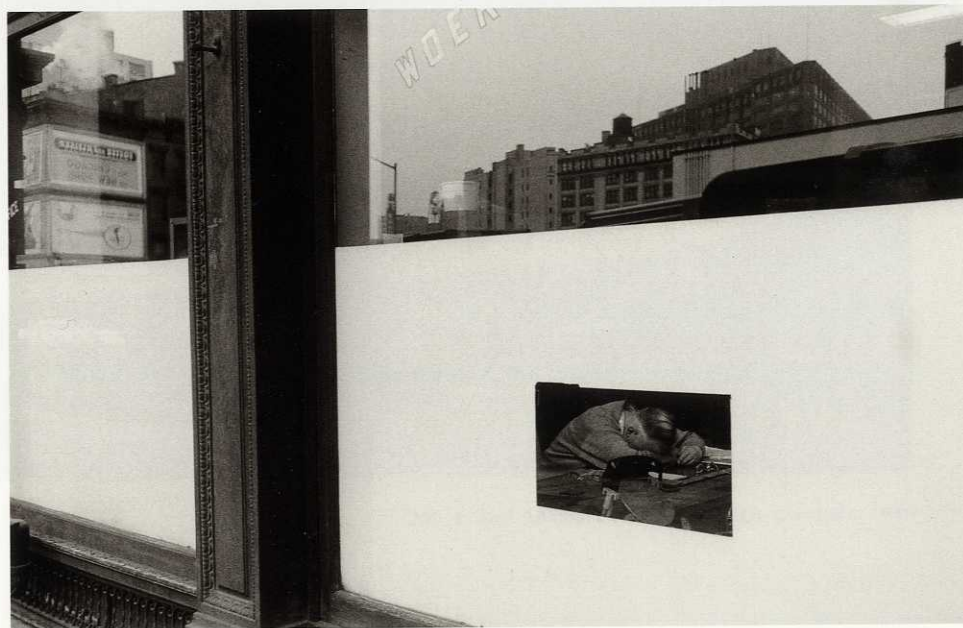
315. Harry Callahan. *Chicago*. 1950



316. Robert Frank. *Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey*. 1955



317. Diane Arbus. *Man at a Parade on Fifth Avenue, New York City*. 1969



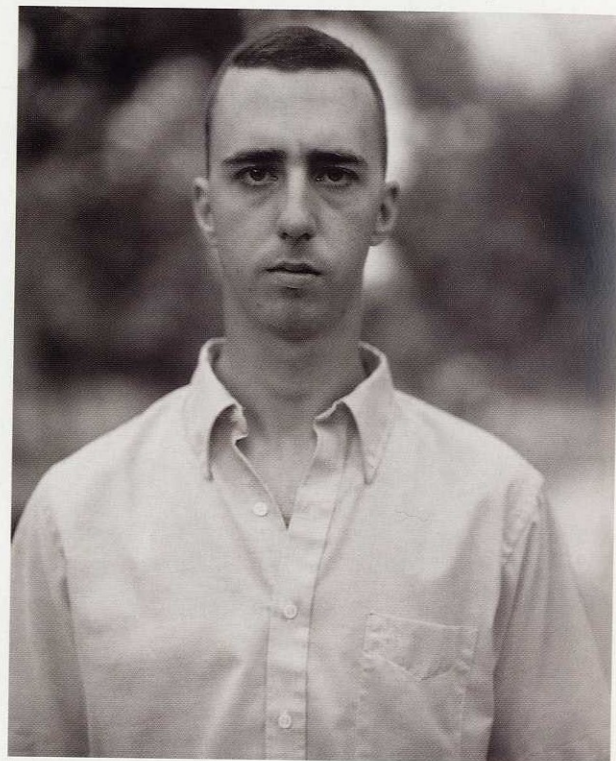
318. Lee Friedlander. *New York City*. 1964



319. Lee Friedlander. *Galax, Virginia*. 1962

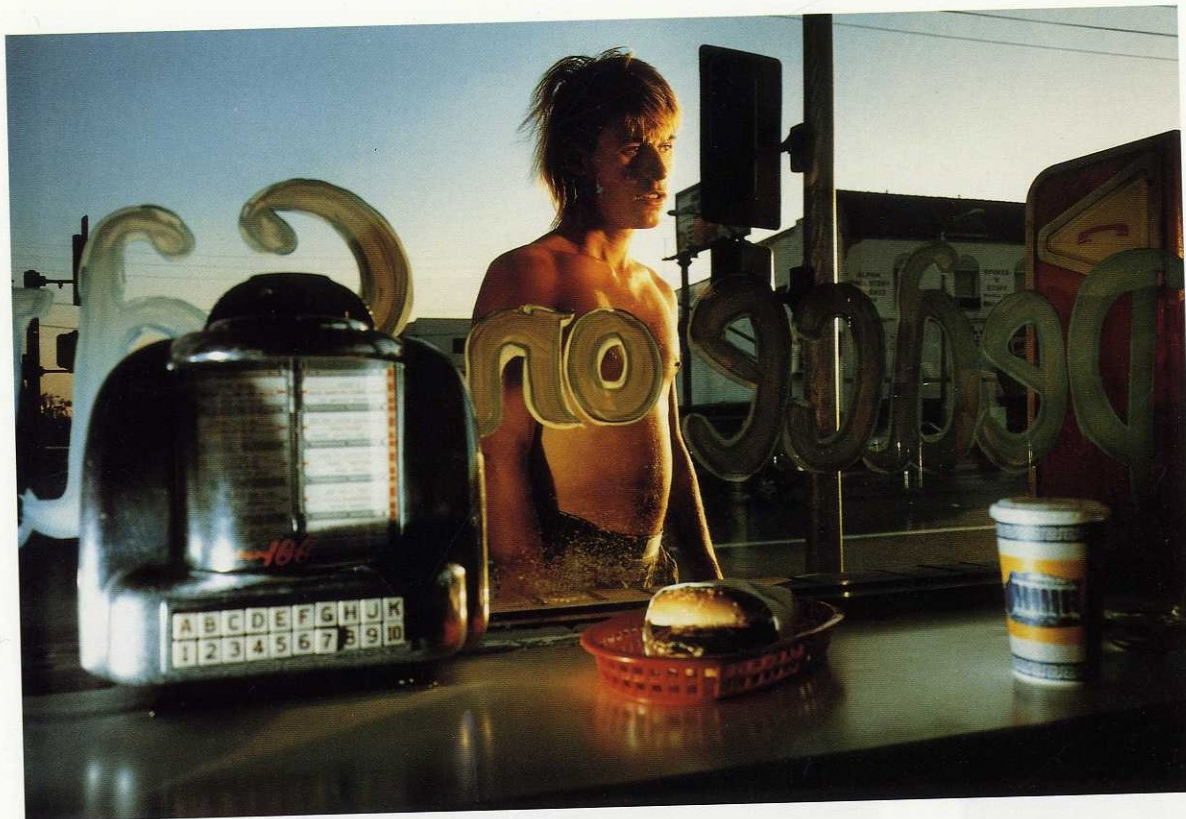


320. Robert Adams. *Colorado Springs, Colorado*. 1968





321. Judith Joy Ross. *Untitled*. 1984. From the series *Portraits at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Washington, D.C. 1983-84



322. Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Eddie Anderson; 21 years old; Houston, Texas; \$20. 1990-92



323. Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Marilyn; 28 years old; Las Vegas, Nevada; \$30. 1990-92

