

DOROTHEA LANGE. *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California. 1936. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

13 • DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

The quality of authenticity implicit in a photograph may give it special value as evidence, or proof. Such a photograph can be called "documentary" by dictionary definition: "an original and official paper relied upon as basis, proof, or support of anything else;—in its most extended sense, including any writing, book, or other instrument conveying information."¹

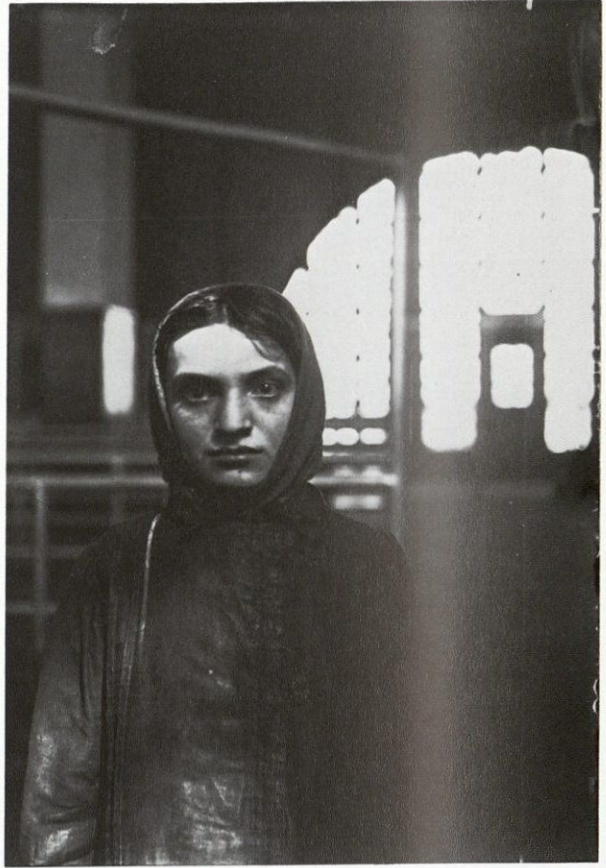
Thus *any* photograph can be considered a document if it is found to contain useful information about the specific subject under study. The word was not infrequently used in the nineteenth century in a photographic context: *The British Journal of Photography* in 1889 urged the formation of a vast archive of photographs "containing a record as complete as it can be made . . . of the present state of the world," and concluded that such photographs "will be most valuable *documents* a century hence."² In a quite different sense, the painter Henri Matisse stated in *Camera Work* in 1908: "Photography can provide the most precious documents existing, and no one can contest its value from that point of view. If it is practised by a man of taste, the photographs will have the appearance of art. . . . Photography should register and give us documents."³

At this time in America, Lewis W. Hine was making a series of remarkable photographs of immigrants arriving in New York. Trained as a sociologist at the Universities of Chicago, Columbia, and New York, he found the camera a powerful tool for research and for communicating his findings to others. He was greatly concerned with the welfare of the underprivileged. In the years before World War I Hine took his camera to Ellis Island to record the immigrants who were then arriving by the tens of thousands. He followed them into the unsavory tenements that became their homes, penetrated into the miserable sweatshops where they found work, and photographed their children playing among the ash-cans and the human derelicts in the sprawling slums of New York City. Hine realized, as Riis had before him, that his photographs were subjective and, for that very reason, were powerful and readily grasped criticisms of the impact of an economic system on the lives of under-

privileged and exploited classes. He described his work as "photo-interpretations." The photographs were published as "human documents." His training enabled him to comprehend instantly, and without effort, the background and its social implications. Unbothered by unnecessary details, his sympathies were concentrated on the individuals before him; throughout his pictures this harmony can be felt. When, with his 5 x 7-inch camera he photographed children working in factories, he showed them at the machines, introducing a sense of scale that enabled the viewer to see that the workers were indeed very young children. His photographs were widely published. The phrase "photo story" was used to describe his work, which was always of equal importance to the writer's and in no sense "illustrations" to it. His revelation of the exploitation of children led to the eventual passing of child labor laws.

Hine by no means limited his photography to negative criticism, but brought out positive human qualities wherever he found them. In 1918 he photographed American Red Cross relief in the Middle European countries; years later he concentrated on American workmen, and a collection of photographs of them was published in 1932 as *Men at Work*.⁴

Perhaps the best photographs in the book were chosen from the hundreds he took of the construction of the 102-story Empire State Building in New York, upon its completion in 1931 the tallest in the world. Day by day, floor by floor, he followed the steelwork upward. With the workmen he toasted sandwiches over the forges that heated the rivets; he walked the girders at dizzying heights, carrying over his shoulder his view camera complete with tripod or, more rarely, his 4 x 5-inch Graflex. When he and the workmen reached the pinnacle of the building, he had them swing him out over the city from a crane so that he might photograph in midair the moment they had all been striving for—the driving of the final rivet at the very top of the skyscraper. These spectacular pictures are not melodramatic; they were not taken for sensation; they are a straightforward record of a job that happened to be dangerous.



Right: LEWIS W. HINE. *Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island.* 1905. Gelatin-silver print. George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y.

Below: LEWIS W. HINE. *Carolina Cotton Mill.* 1908. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





LEWIS W. HINE. *Steelworkers, Empire State Building, New York*. 1931. Gelatin-silver print. George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y.

When the darkness of the Depression fell upon the world in the 1930s, many artists at once reacted to it. In the field of painting the return to realism became pronounced; following the lead of the Mexican muralists, painters began to instruct the public through their work. A group of independent filmmakers had already begun to make films that, in contrast to the usual entertainment productions, were rooted in real problems and real situations, with the participants themselves as the actors. John Grierson, spokesman for a British group, recalls that they felt this type of motion picture

in the recording and the interpretation of fact was a new instrument of public influence which might increase experience and bring the new world of our citizenship into the imagination. It promised us the power of making drama from our daily lives and poetry from our problems.⁵

They called this type of film *documentary*.

As social photographers they shied away from the word "artistic," and the voluminous literature of the movement is insistent that documentary film is *not* art. "Beauty is one of the greatest dangers to documentary," wrote the producer-director Paul Rotha in his *Documentary Film*.⁶ He came to the astonishing conclusion that photography—the very life blood and essence of the motion picture—was of secondary importance and if too good might prove detrimental. Yet Grierson wrote that

documentary was from the beginning . . . an 'anti-aesthetic' movement . . . What confuses the history is that we had always the good sense to use the aesthetes. We did so because we liked them and because we needed them. It was, paradoxically, with the first-rate aesthetic help of people like Robert Flaherty and Alberto Cavalcanti . . . that we mastered the techniques necessary for our quite unaesthetic purpose.⁷

Documentary is, therefore, an approach that makes use of the artistic faculties to give "vivification to fact"—to use Walt Whitman's definition of the place of poetry in the modern world.

At the same time that filmmakers began to talk about "documentary," here and there photographers were using their cameras in a similar way. In 1935 the United States government turned to these photographers for help in fighting the Depression. Among the many agencies that President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought into being by executive order was the Resettlement Administration, charged with the problem of bringing financial aid to the thousands of rural workers driven from their farmlands by the sterility of the "dust bowl" of the central states or by competition with mechanized agricultural practices. The new agency was headed by Rexford G. Tugwell, Undersecretary of Agriculture and former professor of economics at Columbia University. Tugwell

appointed his former student and colleague, Roy E. Stryker, as Chief of the Historical Section with the assignment to direct a vast photographic project, documenting not only the agency's activities, but American rural life in depth. In 1937 the agency became a part of the Department of Agriculture, under the title of the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

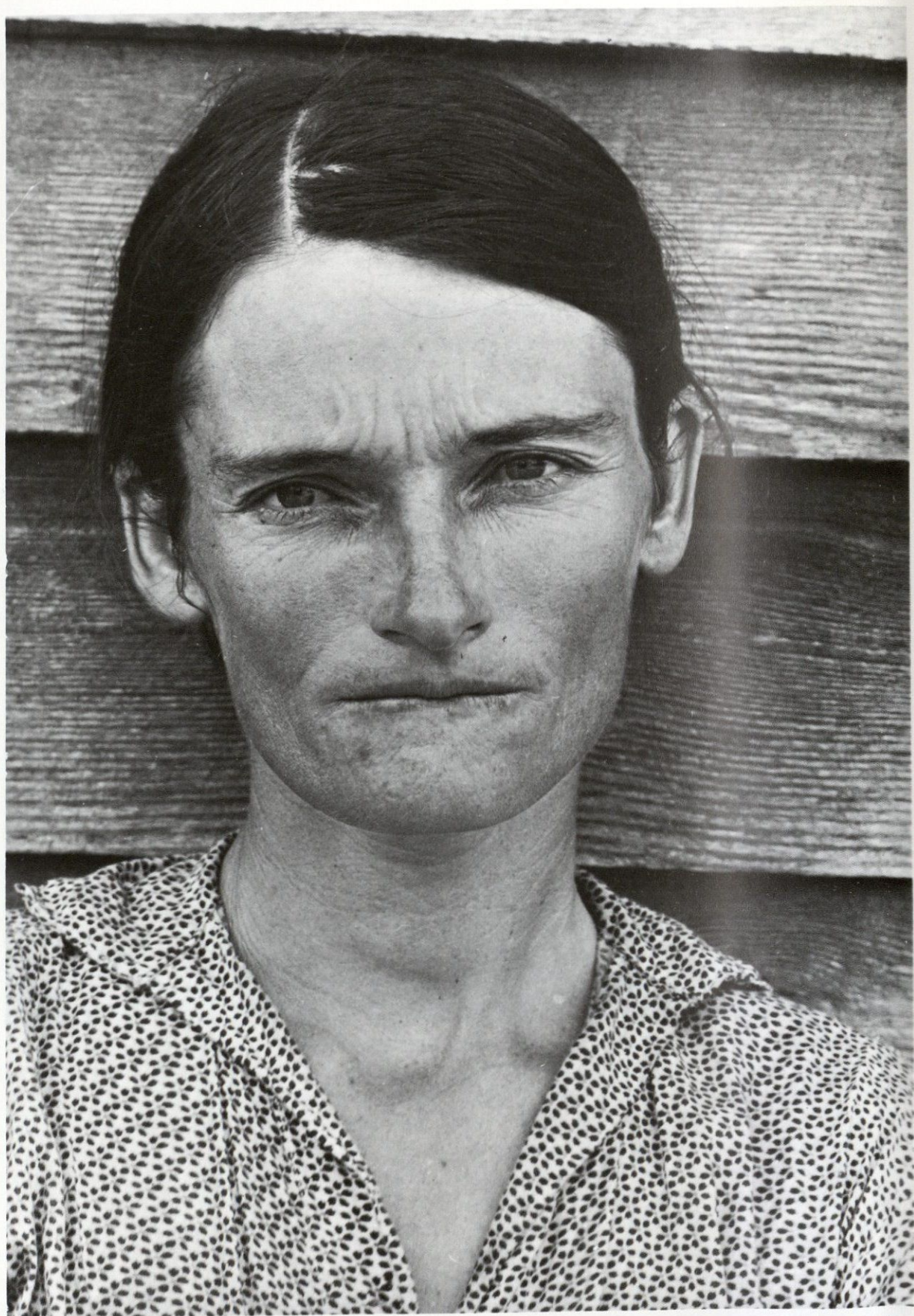
Walker Evans was one of the first photographers to be hired. He continued his dual interest in the American form and the American people. He traveled to the South and documented the condition of the land, the plight of tenant farmers, their houses, their belongings, the way they worked, their crops, their schools and churches and stores. He photographed with an 8 x 10-inch camera crossroads stores, streets of small towns, billboards, and the automobile. Much of what Evans photographed was squalid, but his interpretation was always dignified. Glenway Westcott pointed out that

others have photographed squalid scenes wonderfully; but it has been a wonder dispersed, hit-or-miss in a thousand rotogravure sections, etc. Here is a lot of it, all hanging together: fantastic martyred furniture, lampshades and pictures, rags, hats. Usually Mr. Evans has dismissed the dweller from his dwelling, but we can deduce him. Then one sometimes sees, in wild grass, the indentations where a rabbit has been lying, hungry, quaking. Countrymen of ours like rabbits. . . . For me this is better propaganda than it would be if it were not aesthetically enjoyable. It is because I enjoy looking that I go on looking until the pity and the shame are impressed upon me, unforgettably. And on the superb, absurd old houses . . . there has fallen—along with the neglect and decay—an illumination of pearl, shadows of sable, accentuations as orderly as in music. Look at them. I find that I do not tire of them. Look at the old mansion upon which the rottenness of the wood appears like the marks of a sort of kiss.⁸

Dorothea Lange, who joined the Resettlement Administration photographic team in 1935, had a portrait studio in San Francisco. During the Depression she was dismayed to see breadlines of the homeless and unemployed and was determined to photograph them so that others might feel the compassion she so deeply felt. Her prints were exhibited by Willard Van Dyke of Group f/64 in his Oakland gallery. There they were seen by Paul S. Taylor, professor of economics at the University of California, who was so impressed that he used her photographs to illustrate the report of a survey he was making on agricultural labor problems in the state. The report was seen by Tugwell and Stryker, who invited her to join their project. Her photographs of migratory workers with overlaid jalopies on the highways, living in tents pitched in fields or the town dump, in transient camps, working in the fields, are at once an accurate record and a moving comment, for she had a deep feeling of compassion and respect for them.



WALKER EVANS. *Garage, Atlanta, Georgia*. 1936. Gelatin-silver print. The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



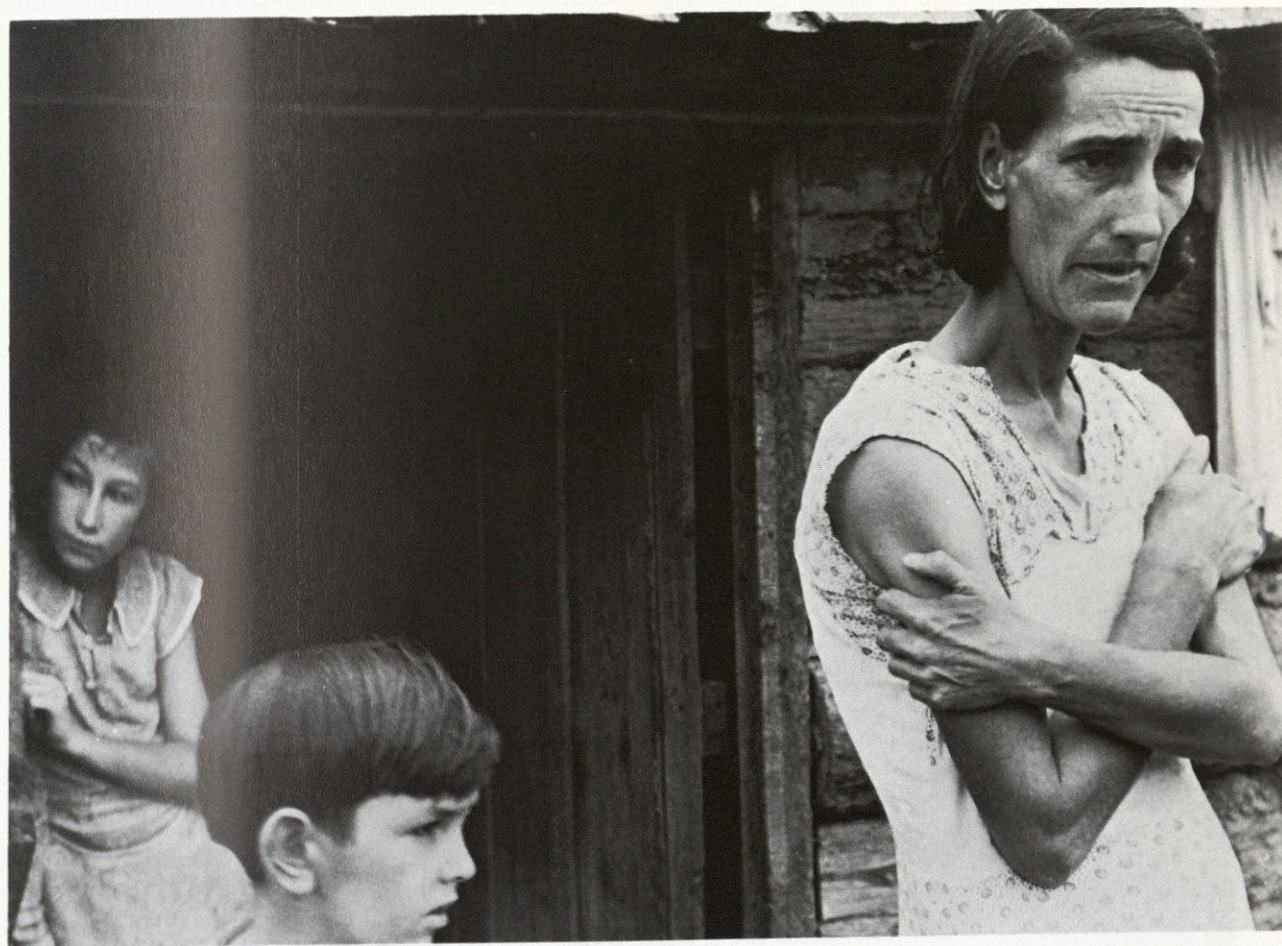
WALKER EVANS. *Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of a Cotton Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama.* 1936. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



WALKER EVANS. *Washroom and Dining Area of Floyd Burroughs' Home, Hale County, Alabama.* 1936. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



DOROTHEA LANGE. *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas*. 1938. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



BEN SHAHN. *Rehabilitation Client, Boone County, Arkansas*. 1935. Gelatin-silver print. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

Lange could make a deserted farmhouse, abandoned in acres of machine-plowed land, an eloquent definition of the phrase "tractored-out," which was on the lips of hundreds of dispossessed farmers. Her photograph of a migrant mother surrounded by her children, huddled in a tent, became the most widely reproduced of all the FSA pictures. She wrote:

My own approach is based upon three considerations. First—hands off! Whatever I photograph, I do not molest or tamper with or arrange. Second—a sense of place. Whatever I photograph, I try to picture as part of its surroundings, as having roots. Third—a sense of time. Whatever I photograph, I try to show as having its position in the past or in the present.⁹

Ben Shahn, the painter, made hundreds of photographs for Stryker with a 35mm camera fitted with a right-angle viewfinder, so that he could photograph people without their knowledge. These informal portraits superficially appear to be snapshots; they are transient images, and yet many are massive, even sculptural, bearing a close affinity to the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom Shahn greatly admired.

The scope of the FSA project included all phases of

rural America. The small town is such an integral part of our agricultural fabric that it could not be overlooked. Sherwood Anderson found enough material in the thousands of FSA photographs to make a picture book, *Home Town*,¹⁰ showing the positive side of typical American community life.

During the course of its seven years, until its entire resources were turned over to the Office of War Information during World War II, the FSA project employed Russell Lee, John Vachon, Theodor Jung, Paul Carter, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, and John Collier, Jr., in addition to Evans, Lange, and Shahn. The work, which is now in the collection of the Library of Congress in Washington, is remarkably cohesive and yet individual. Each photographer contributed to the project; working together, sharing common problems, they helped one another. The scope of the documentation and its general aim were controlled and guided by Stryker, who briefed the photographers on the sociological and economic backgrounds of their assignments, stimulated their imagination, and encouraged their curiosity. Not a photographer himself, Stryker wisely left all questions of equipment, technique, and style of visualization



MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE. *Conversation Club*. From the photo essay "Muncie, Indiana" in *Life*, May 10, 1937. *Life* Magazine, © Time Inc.

to the individual photographers. He pointed out:

Documentary is an approach, not a technique; an affirmation, not a negation. . . . The documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work. It merely gives these elements limitation and direction. Thus composition becomes emphasis, and line sharpness, focus, filtering, mood—all those components included in the dreary vagueness "quality" are made to serve an end: to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the things to be said in the language of pictures.¹¹

The documentary approach was eagerly pursued elsewhere. Margaret Bourke-White, who had made an enviable reputation as a photographer of industry for *Fortune* and *Life* magazines, produced with the writer Erskine Caldwell a photographic survey of the South in *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937).¹² Eleven pages of *Life* for May 10, 1937, were devoted to her photographs of Muncie, Indiana, the city that had been selected by Robert and Helen Lynd for their sociological study *Middletown*, published in 1929. Bourke-White's photographic essay was presented as "an important American document"; it showed the aspect of the city from the ground and from the air, the homes of the rich and the poor; it was an unusually graphic cross section of an American community.

New York City found its interpreter in Berenice Abbott, who in 1929 decided to give up her Paris studio, where she had produced many striking portraits of artists and writers, and return to America. Impressed by the complex and ever-varied life of New York, she began the task of photographing not only the outward aspect of the metropolis, but its very spirit. At first she worked alone, then under the auspices of the Art Project of the Work Progress Administration (WPA). The negatives and a set of master prints from them are now in the Museum of the City of New York; they are historical source material, for many of the landmarks she photographed no longer exist. A selection of her work was published in book form with the title *Changing New York*¹³ in 1939. She wrote:

To make the portrait of a city is a life work and no one portrait suffices, because the city is always changing. Everything in the city is properly part of its story—its physical body of brick, stone, steel, glass, wood, its life-blood of living, breathing men and women. Streets, vistas, panoramas, bird's eye views and worm's eye views, the noble and the shameful, high life and low life, tragedy, comedy, squalor, wealth, the mighty towers of skyscrapers, the ignoble façades of slums, people at work, people at home, people at play. . . .¹⁴

In her instruction manual *A Guide to Better Photography*, Abbot advises the photographer to use as large a camera as possible, so that the records will be fully detailed and rich in information. Such photographs can be



BERENICE ABBOTT. *Wall Street, New York*. 1933. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

read; they are not illustrations but actual source material.

Fox Talbot observed in *The Pencil of Nature* that it frequently happens, moreover—and this is one of the charms of photography—that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he had depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls. . . .¹⁵

It is significant that, time after time, the documentary photographer includes in his image printed words and wall scrawls. More than one photographer in the bitterness of the thirties chose to contrast billboard slogans with the contrary evidence of the camera. A sign, photographed as an object, carries more impact than the literal transcription of the words it bears.

However revealing or beautiful a documentary photograph may be, it cannot stand on its image alone. Paradoxically, before a photograph can be accepted as a document, it must itself be documented—placed in time and space. This may be effectively done by context, by including the familiar with the unfamiliar, either in one image or in paired images. A series of photographs, presented in succession on exhibition walls or on the pages of a book, may be greater than the sum of the parts. Thus in *American Photographs*, published by The Museum of Modern Art in 1938 at the time of his exhibition, Walker Evans arranged his photographs in two separate series and relied upon the sequence of images to show in the first part "the physiognomy of a nation" and in the second part "the continuous fact of an indigenous American expression." Each photograph was numbered and factual titles were supplied at the end of each section. In a collaborative work with the writer James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Evans grouped his photographs in the front of the book, in front of the title page itself.¹⁶ They were presented without a single word of explanation. They were, Agee wrote, ". . . not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative."

In contrast to the austerity of this book design, Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor in *An American Exodus* (1939) presented a close relation between the image and the word by printing with the photographs excerpts

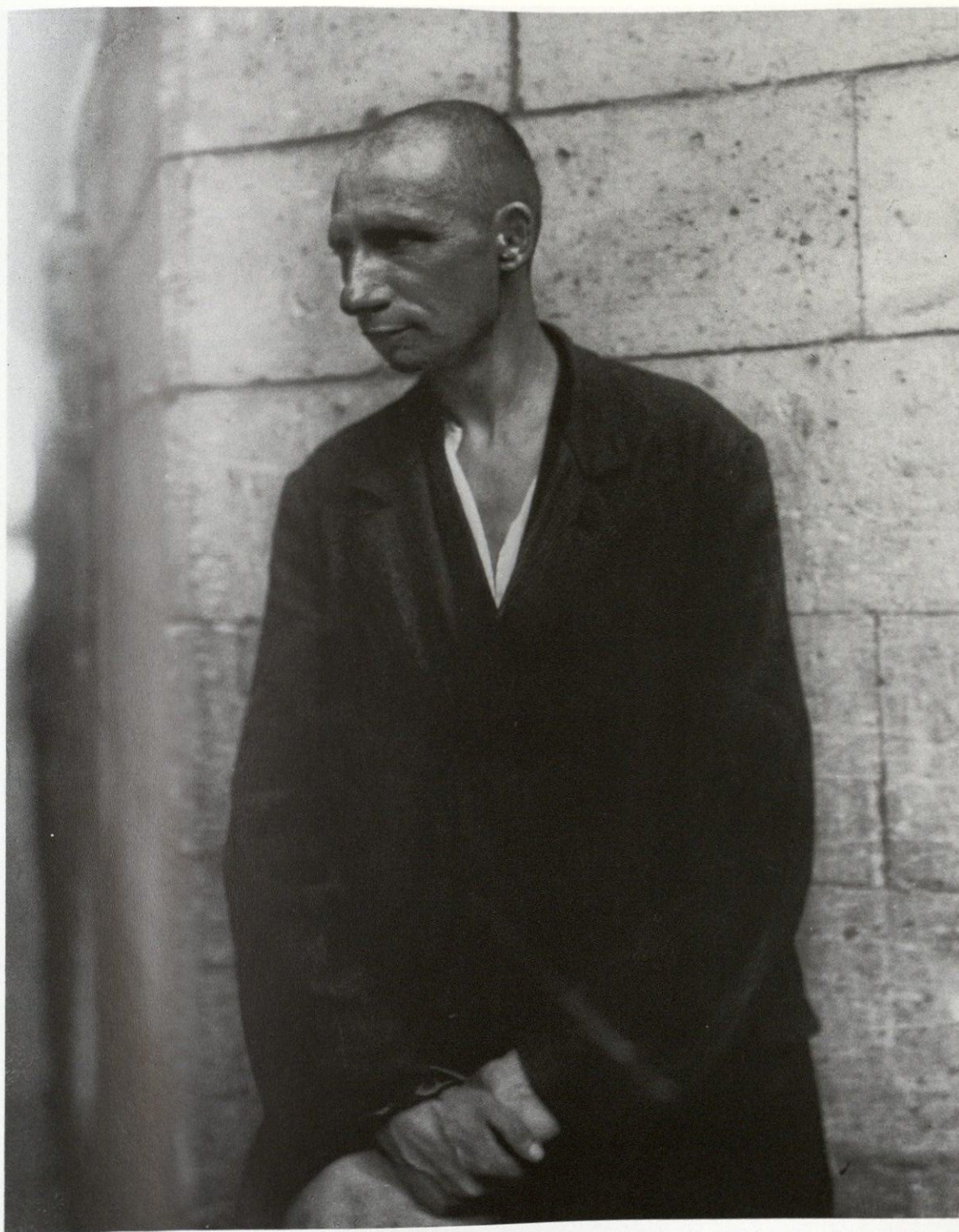
from conversation heard or overheard at the time of photographing—an approach in itself wholly documentary in spirit.¹⁷ Yet another device was used in *Land of the Free* (1938), a collection of documentary photographs, mostly from the FSA files, to which Archibald MacLeish supplied a "sound track" in the form of a poem.¹⁸ He explained that,

The original purpose had been to write some sort of text to which these photographs might serve as a commentary. But so great was the power and stubborn inward livingness of these vivid American documents that the result was a reversal of that plan.

In all of these, and in many other publications of similar nature, the chief characteristic is that the photographs assert their independence. They are not illustrations. They carry the message together with the text.

In Germany in 1910 August Sander, a professional portrait photographer, began an ambitious program: the production of a vast atlas of German types from all classes of the social structure. He sought, not the individual personality, but the representative of various professions, trades, and businesses, as well as members of social and political groups. He called his project "Man in the Twentieth Century." In 1929 the first of a proposed series of twenty volumes of Sander's photographs was published under the title *Anlitz der Zeit* ("Face of Our Time").¹⁹ No further volumes appeared, for the political implications displeased the Nazi regime. The publisher's inventory of books was confiscated, and the printing plates destroyed.

"Documentary," in the sense in which we have described it, has been accepted as the definition of a style. Since World War II the movement has lost impetus in the organizational sense. Its tenets have been absorbed and have become essential to the fabric of photojournalism and, especially, to the style of factual reporting developed by television. Substitutes have been suggested for the word "documentary": "historical," "factual," "realistic." While each of these qualities is contained within "documentary," none conveys the deep respect for fact coupled with the desire to create the basically subjective interpretation of the world in which we live that marks documentary photography at its best.



AUGUST SANDER. *Unemployed Man, Cologne*. 1928. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.