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AFTER ATGET: TODD WEBB PHOTOGRAPHS NEW YORK and PARIS

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BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART
BRUNSWICK, MAINE



**AFTER ATGET:
TODD WEBB
PHOTOGRAPHS
NEW YORK and
PARIS**

DIANA TUIE

**INTRODUCTION
by BRITT SALVESEN**

**BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART
BRUNSWICK, MAINE**



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This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *After Atget: Todd Webb Photographs New York and Paris* on view from October 28, 2011 through January 29, 2012 at Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

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COVER Fig. 26 (detail):
Todd Webb (American, 1905–2000)
Rue Alesia, Paris (Oscar billboards), 1951
Vintage gelatin silver print
4 × 5 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

PAGES 2–3 Fig. 1 (detail): Todd Webb
Harlem, NY (5 boys leaning on fence), 1946
Vintage gelatin silver print
5 × 7 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

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INTRODUCTION

BRITT SALVESEN

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Photography arose from motivations of utility and artistry, and its subsequent history can also be charted in those terms. That is to say, almost any photograph can be evaluated by the ratio of these two impulses, although no evaluation is conclusive. Many pictures (indeed, many categories of pictures) have been reassessed during the medium's 175-year history. Anonymous, commercial photographs have been co-opted by the art market, while the serious aesthetic attempts of a prior era may be dismissed as kitsch. One way of looking at the established canon of great photographers is to recognize how freely these individuals drew upon existing conventions of utility and artistry, without settling on a formula.

French photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927) is a paradigmatic example. Undeniably, his photographs have been put to many practical uses, as intended by Atget himself, demonstrated by his clients, and inferred by later historians. In another kind of use (especially pertinent in this context), many photographers have drawn inspiration from his work. This exhibition brings to the fore a special aspect of photographic history: until recently it was written largely by photographers. The key curators and authors—Alfred Stieglitz,



FIG. 2 Lucille Webb
Todd Webb in our Studio, 1949
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 4 × 5 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, and John Szarkowski—were all photographers themselves, and they all conferred with other practicing photographers in selecting whom to collect and exhibit.

The fine-art photography world was a small one, and information circulated through personal connections. This story starts with Berenice Abbott and her discovery of Atget, via Man Ray, shortly after the French photographer's death in 1927. With the cooperation of dealer Julien Levy, Abbott secured the archive of Atget's prints and negatives, and she herself made prints of certain images. These were first shown in 1930 at New York's Weyhe Gallery and at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. Note that these venues were for *contemporary* art, which implies that the maker was considered an artist, not an archivist or a commercial photographer. Those versions of Atget do exist in other accounts of his life, but when he was introduced to America in 1930, it was as an "ancestor figure." For anyone claiming a so-called straight, modernist aesthetic for the medium, he served as a through-line from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, cutting through the hazy excesses of Pictorialism.

Coming of age as a photographer in the 1940s, Todd Webb (Fig. 2) was prepared to see Atget this way. First, he had a formative encounter with Ansel Adams when the already famous landscape photographer conducted a workshop in Detroit in 1941. Adams was not extolling Atget per se, but he did advocate a form of photographic artistry that dispensed with picturesque stylings borrowed from painting and instead exploited the detail and precision enabled by the large-format camera. The work Adams was making in 1941 included intimate details of natural motifs as well as the more familiar panoramic landscapes. Webb explored similar subjects with his friend Harry Callahan in the environs of Detroit until he was interrupted by wartime service in the Pacific.

Then, in 1945, Webb entered the photographic community in New York, where he soon became acquainted with Newhall and Steichen. These highly influential figures had their differences of opinion and approach, but both were staunch defenders of photography's essential realism and expressive potential. While the illustrated magazines of this period, chief among them *Life* and *Look*, must

be credited with bringing photography to millions of readers, The Museum of Modern Art under Newhall and Steichen began to feature the medium as one of the fine arts.

Webb also met fellow photographers Walker Evans and Helen Levitt in addition to Abbott, who was still actively forging Atget's legacy following her initial discovery of his archive in Paris. Through her, Webb first saw Atget's work. Much as Atget's photographs portray Paris in the first three decades of the 1900s, the photographs Webb had been making in New York can be seen as a collective portrait of that city at the century's midpoint. Webb's 1949 assignment to document the impact of the Marshall Plan in Paris effectively brought him face-to-face with Atget.

While he probably acknowledged their common purpose as documentarians, as Diana Tuite discusses in her essay in this catalogue, Webb also looked at Atget as a fellow artist, and he would instantly have perceived a shared ability to combine romanticism and objectivity. Both men deployed large-format cameras to capture maximum information, infusing commonplace scenes with mood and mystery. Both pointed to contrasts between old and new, but not in a heavy-handed or overly didactic manner. And both took on the persona of the lone pedestrian, wandering the streets and recording signs of human habitation while seldom including an actual figure (Figs. 3 and 4).



FIG. 3 Todd Webb
Rue du Bac, Paris, 1949
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 4 Eugène Atget (French, 1857–1927)
Cour, 28 Rue Bonaparte, Paris, 1910
Gelatin silver print
7 1/16 × 8 9/16 inches
Bowdoin College Museum of Art



For Webb, this approach allowed him to remain in the present moment. “I have an intense interest in and feeling for people,” he wrote in 1954. “And often I find subject matter with no visible persons to be more peopled than a crowded city street. Every window, doorway, street, building, every mark on a wall, every sign, has a human connotation. All are signs and symbols of people—a way of living—living in our time.” With his attentiveness to “signs,” Webb identified himself with larger postwar preoccupations, specifically an impulse to “read” the city.



FIG. 5 Todd Webb
From Empire State Building, NY, 1946
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 6 Todd Webb
Movie Poster, Paris, 1949
Gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



Already by Atget's day, the city was a site where modernity and history came into contact (and, often, conflict). The Second World War, among many other social forces, intensified the urban experience. Photographers responded in a variety of ways to the diversity, energy, resilience, and sheer visual spectacle of cities such as New York and Paris. Webb bore witness to human ambition in his images of towering skyscrapers (Fig. 5); he also noted areas where such aspiration had yet to reach. Working in his native country, with many contemporaries engaged in similar photographic projects, he honed his instincts and produced work impressive enough to be featured regularly in exhibitions.

Paris provided Webb an opportunity to test and refine his ideas about the city. Certain visual strategies and motifs proved remarkably adaptable: the carefully framed movie poster, for example. In New York in 1945 Webb captured the dramatic title fragment "Love a Mystery" below the tough, squinting glare of an actor in a fedora. Four years later, newly arrived in Paris, he found a poster for "Tendresse" illustrated with a woman's yearning face (Fig. 6). In this comparison, Webb contrasted the two cities along the lines of popular association: New York is all masculine deception, while Paris is feminine devotion.





Reference to Atget allowed Webb to make more subtle comparisons as well, based not only on textual cues but also on urban space and texture. A pair of photographs suggests the transposition. First we have Atget's *Cour Greneta* of 1907 (Fig. 7), a perspectival street view anchored front and center by an ironwork double lamppost. Then we look at Webb's Paris view of 1949 (Fig. 8), a close study of the surfaces in a passageway that is more a discrete space than a thoroughfare.

Looking at Webb's work between 1945 and 1952, we can see that he set out to be an observer in his own time, while Atget prioritized the remembrance and preservation of the past. It is as if Webb, at precisely the moment when the center of the traditional art world was shifting from Paris to New York, decided to translate his French predecessor for the postwar American photography scene. Separated by only a few decades, using roughly similar equipment, and working with the same subjects and compositional strategies, Atget and Webb help us trace the historicist lineage within modernism. The term "vintage" evokes not just the subtle sheen of a gelatin silver print, but a state of mind.

FIG. 7 Eugène Atget (French, 1857–1927)
Cour Greneta 163 Rue St. Denis et 32 Rue Greneta (2c), 1907
 Albumen print
 8 $\frac{3}{10}$ × 7 inches
 Collection of George Eastman House

FIG. 8 Todd Webb
Courtyard off Cour de Commerce, Paris, 1949
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 5 × 7 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

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FRANCOIS PERIER
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PELLE: ANAÏS - LES COCQUEAU
ALBERT ROUSSIN - FLORENCE GIRON

MAR LINDER
LA MARIE DU PORT

LES PARADES
LA CAGE AUX FILLES

LORETTA YOGAN - ROBERT ROBINSON
MIRAGES DE LA PEUR
WYNELL CONRY

PARLANT
LOUISIANA STORY
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instablement drôle



FIG. 9 Todd Webb
 Pillar Boxes, Blvd. St. Michel, Paris (Edith Piaf), 1949
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 7 × 9 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

SIGNS of the CITY

DIANA TUIITE

Diana Tuite is the curator of
After Atget: Todd Webb Photographs
New York and Paris.

“After I gave some thought to my pictures I realized very humbly that their signs actually expressed the mood of the people ... they are really signs of the city.” —Todd Webb¹

Todd Webb’s photograph of a Parisian cobbler’s shop (Fig. 10), taken in 1950, is at first glance a straightforward image. Soles and insoles—those elements of the shoe that index the size and silhouette of the foot—face out, pressed flat against the shop windows. Our intuitive understanding of the nature of the business renders any additional signage (which may or may not have existed) superfluous. Indeed, this very economy of signification would seem to be the subject of the photograph. An object of the utmost utility and universality, the shoe insinuates a corporeal presence even as it symbolically condenses passage through life (“walking in one’s shoes”). As it turns out, the shoe is an apt emblem of Webb’s body of work in the 1940s.



FIG. 10 Todd Webb
Paris (shoes in window), 1950
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



FIG. 11 Eugène Atget (French, 1857–1927)
Balcon 16 Rue Beaujolais (1e arr), 1913
 Albumen print
 8½ × 7 inches
 Collection of George Eastman House

Webb maintained that when he and his friend Harry Callahan decided to become photographers, “[we] lost our competitive spirit and that is what makes America tick.”² Nevertheless, in 1946, when Webb embarked upon his photographic career, he harbored aspirations to the status of “documentarian.” Commercial assignments took him to Paris, which, along with New York, furnished him with much of his material until 1952. The photographic camaraderie between the two cities was flourishing, particularly through exhibitions, and Webb would synthesize a great deal of inspiration from both places as he attempted to negotiate the thorny requirements of the documentary genre.³ As one early critical response to his work demonstrates, the path was thick with paradox: “Mr. Webb’s approach veered toward the documentary, in which the photographer attempts pictorial commentaries.”⁴

In so steering their course, Webb and the other emergent “documentarians” were indebted to the work of French photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927), a prolific and singularly intentional chronicler of Paris and its environs. After Atget’s death, his work was transmitted to American audiences by photographer Berenice Abbott, who had acquired Atget’s archive of prints and negatives, and with whom Webb would become close friends.⁵ When Webb first encountered the French photographer’s work at Abbott’s studio in New York, he confessed to feeling an immediate kinship: “I had never even heard of Atget, but when Berenice told us about him it seemed to me that I was doing the same thing in New York that Atget had done in Paris a half-century earlier.”⁶

Of course it had been fewer than twenty years since Atget’s death, far from the decades Webb recounted, but the misperception is understandable given the

ahistorical quality of Atget’s images. The prints produced by this journeyman photographer had been purchased by artists, architects, and antiquarians precisely for this uninflected aspect (Fig. 11): a muteness that enables them to serve as surfaces onto which desires are projected. As many scholars have noted, Atget’s oeuvre has often functioned as a kind of found object, one that, beginning with the Surrealists, has been continuously repurposed and redirected.⁷ What, then, did Webb see in Atget, and how did the Frenchman’s malleable images help to frame the aspirations, operations, and, in turn, the critical reception of a generation of earnest proto-street photographers?⁸

This essay examines Webb’s body of work from the late 1940s, a time when photographers on both sides of the Atlantic were engaged in an active discourse on the status of the documentary mode. In looking to Atget as a model, Webb circumvented the factionalism of recent photographic history and identified pictorial strategies for his own work: an urban, humanist project that ran counter to prevailing photographic tendencies, particularly the “touristic.”⁹ Where Atget’s gaze was retrospective, however, Webb encoded his photographs, such as that of the shoemaker’s shop, with an acute sensitivity to the postwar ethos. He looked within the immanence of change, so thoroughly articulated in Atget’s work, to the static and the interstitial. The cobbler, an artisanal rather than an industrial figure, is outmoded—like Webb, he could be seen as lacking “competitive spirit”—but at the same time he represents the satisfaction of a basic and perpetual need. In many ways Webb’s photographs depict collections of actions without agents, inscribing social relationships at their most elemental even as they are bound to their historical present.

BEGINNINGS

Todd Webb (1905–2000) had already lived and traveled extensively—playing the stock market, prospecting for gold—before he took up photography with any seriousness. In 1938, while working for the Chrysler Corporation in his hometown of Detroit, Webb joined the Camera Club, where he met fellow employee Harry Callahan. The two men, who would become lifelong friends, enrolled in a 1941 Detroit Photo Guild workshop led by famed California landscape photographer Ansel Adams, who taught them to shoot outdoors and to hone their developing and printing skills.

As though to demonstrate the virtues of technique over subject matter (and perhaps distance himself from Adams's ambitious landscapes), Webb devised a number of assignments premised on self-imposed restraints, a method of working he followed throughout the course of his career. For example, he resolved to spend three months shooting photographs exclusively within the spaces of his house and yard. Among the works in this series are startling contact prints of his ceiling illuminated by a floodlight (Fig. 12). Webb expressed some uneasiness at the degree of disorientation realized in these images, writing that "They looked like abstract optical illusions, something I didn't understand."¹⁰ Indeed, the high-contrast lighting blunts some hard contours while steeling others, achieving effects alternately painterly and graphic.

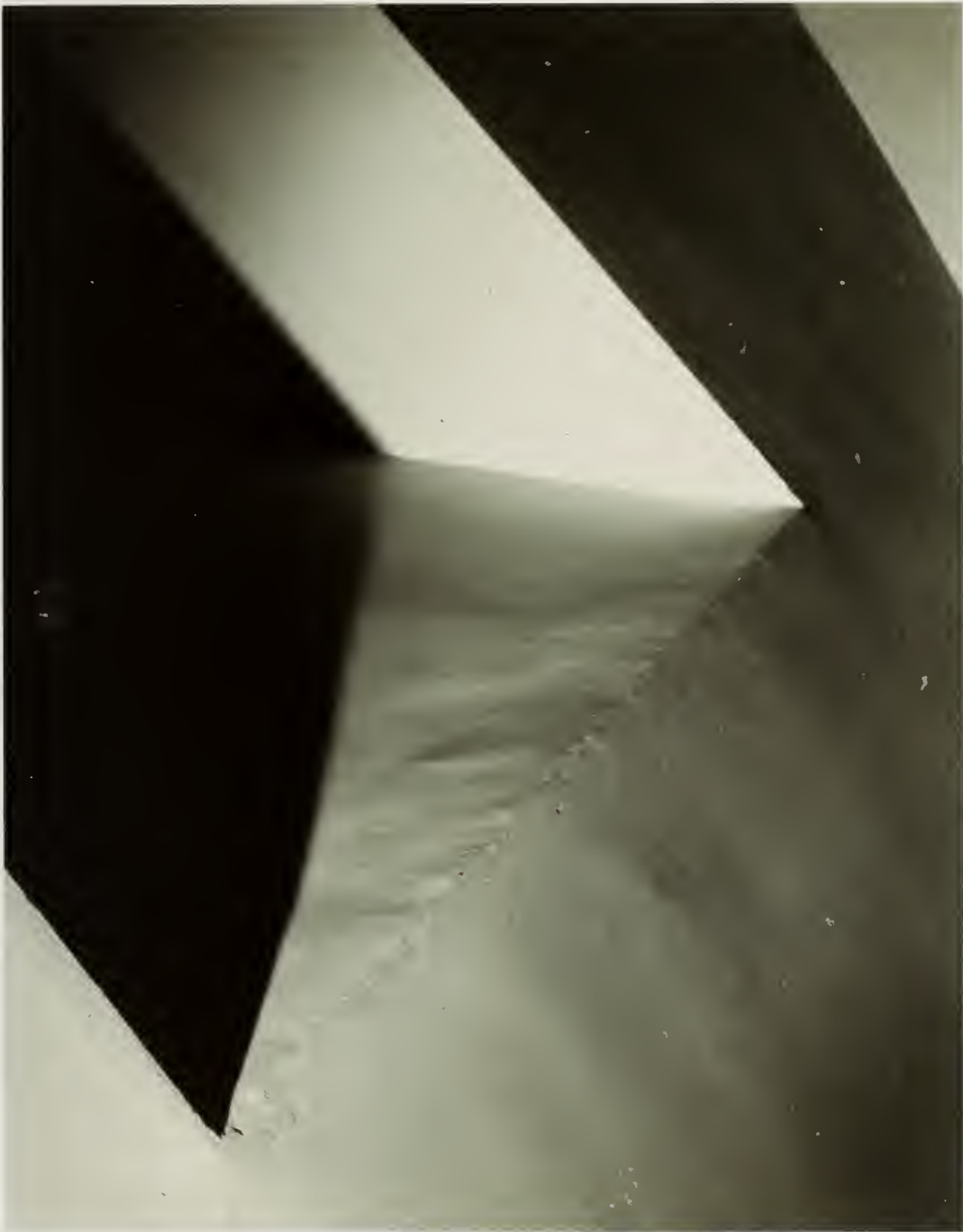


FIG. 12 Todd Webb
Ceiling of my house, Detroit, 1942
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb





Webb enlisted in the United States Navy in 1942, leaving his large-format view camera in Callahan's care. Discharged in 1945, he headed for New York, arriving on the scene in time to forge a close relationship with photographic impresario Alfred Stieglitz (Fig. 13). As the founder of the early twentieth-century Photo-Secession movement and the proprietor of a succession of innovative galleries exhibiting photography and modern art, most recently "An American Place," Stieglitz was an art-world institution. Through him, Webb gained access to a condensed history of the medium and, just as significant, introductions to fellow practitioners, theorists, and curators. Stieglitz proved a formative influence on Webb's thinking. One need only look at Webb's *The Fulton Street El Station* (Fig. 14), which he described as one of his more "obvious" photographs, to appreciate his glance back to Stieglitz's famous *The Hand of Man*, taken in 1902.¹¹

FIG. 13 Todd Webb
Alfred Stieglitz at an American Place, New York, 1946
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 11 × 14 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 14 Todd Webb
From Fulton St. El Station, NY, 1948
 Gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

NEW YORK ANEW

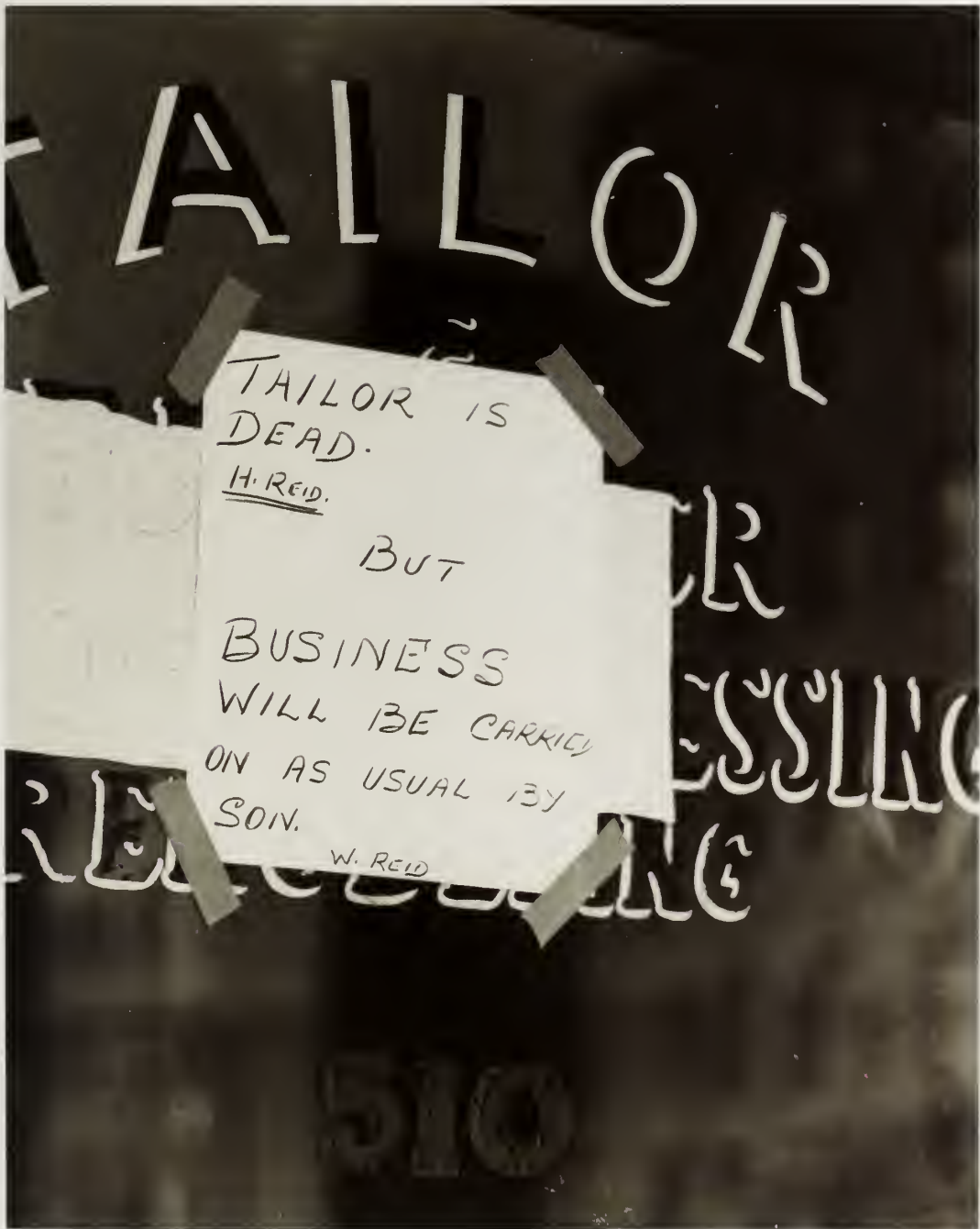
A Narcissus among cities if ever there was one, New York never tires of encountering itself as a photographic subject. The photographs that Webb shot in 1945 and 1946—while on what he described as a self-awarded Guggenheim fellowship—portray a city being visited by tremendous change. In many ways it is more difficult to characterize Webb's collective portrait than to articulate what it is not. It is not, for example, the New York of Berenice Abbott's 1939 *Changing New York*. With funding from the Federal Art Project and sponsorship from the Museum of the City of New York, Abbott had set out to "suggest the flux of activity of the metropolis, the interaction of human beings and solid architectural constructions, all impinging upon each other in time."¹² Operating within a long tradition of artists as narrators of delirious urban ambition, Abbott amassed an archive of 305 photographs, many of which manifest an arch-modernist desire to bind representation by means of motion across time and space (Fig. 15).

Webb, who clearly held himself to the same modernist, Cubist-derived expectations, bemoaned the fact that his box camera prevented him from achieving the urban dynamism that a painter such as John Marin could so cannily capture: "He has the things I feel about New York down on paper. He has the crowded, chaotic feeling I can't get with my big view camera."¹³ Working with an array of large-format cameras (including a 5 x 7 Deardorff and a Speed Graphic), Webb instead distilled his vision into the anecdotal. In *123rd Street New York (Tailor is Dead)* (Fig. 16), for instance, he inserts his image into the discontinuity between the presumably sudden death of the tailor and the resumption of business by his son. It was this New York, newly emerged from the Second World War, that Webb encountered as both photographer and as veteran (with film stock in short supply, he applied as a G.I. for priority access).



FIG. 15 Berenice Abbott (American, 1898–1991)
*Daily News Building, 42nd Street
between 2nd and 3rd Avenue, 1935*
Gelatin silver print
9½ x 7½ inches
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

FIG. 16 Todd Webb
123rd St., New York (Tailor is Dead), 1946
Gelatin silver print
8 x 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



TAILOR IS
DEAD.

H. REID.

BUT

BUSINESS
WILL BE CARRIED
ON AS USUAL BY
SON.

W. REID

TAILOR

ESSLING

510



FIG. 17 Todd Webb
125th St., Harlem, NY, 1945
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 18 Todd Webb
Greenwich Village, NY (Alex's Borsht Bowl), 1946
Vintage gelatin silver print
4½ × 6½ inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



The symbolic value of this return to business as usual would not have been lost on either the photographer or his audience. An image of a serviceman having his shoes shined on a street corner in Harlem (Fig. 17) likewise asserted a kind of normalcy.

As the photograph of the tailor's shop demonstrates, Webb frequently relied on storefronts to function as interlocutors: "They interested me because they tell so much. The merchants behind them seem to know their neighborhoods and their people and they display their wares accordingly."¹⁴ Webb characterized these commercial zones as revelatory sites, even as he delighted in the flatness and opacity of windows such as those in *Alex's Borshht Bowl* (Fig. 18). At times, as in his Numbers series (Fig. 19), the graphic immediacy of typography is all that anchors the legibility of an image.¹⁵

If these public spaces can be seen as performing cultural mirroring, then their stasis may be just as telling as their activity. Here (Fig. 20), for example, on perpendicular panes of glass, are posters that by 1946 had poignantly outlived their purpose. The one at left was printed by the Office of War Information after one of the Four Freedoms paintings by Norman Rockwell, which echo a famous passage in President Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. Facing forward is a campaign poster, designed by the artist Ben Shahn in 1944, for Roosevelt's fourth presidential bid; the poster's wilted state obscures what otherwise would have been a familiar Roosevelt campaign slogan, "Our Friend."



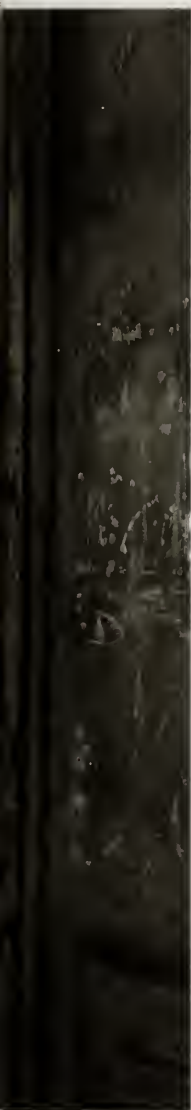


FIG. 19 Todd Webb
New York, Number Series (40), 1946
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 5 × 7 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



FIG. 20 Todd Webb
106th St., New York (FDR), 1946
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 5 × 7 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 21 Todd Webb
*3rd. Ave, New York ("Welcome Home
 Nickie ... Joie")*, 1945
 Gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

Through Stieglitz, Webb was introduced to Beaumont Newhall, head of the photography department at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Newhall orchestrated Webb's first solo exhibition, *I See a City*, which opened at the Museum of the City of New York in 1946 and included 160 photographs. The exhibition represented the fruits of ten months of labor since Webb had settled in New York. Newhall, like a number of other critics, remarked upon Webb's extraordinary capacity for evocation despite the fact that his box camera made it technically challenging to photograph people: "He brings out the human quality even when people are absent."¹⁶ In this respect, Webb's photography certainly invited comparison to Atget's corpus, about which Ferd Reyher wrote, "In his comparatively unpeopled photography is the record of a people."¹⁷ For both men, the effect was partially owed to their cameras. Within Atget's documents, figures, when they do appear, occupy particular typological functions.¹⁸ For Webb, the supporting roles that people play in his New York images might also represent a reaction to the body as an emotionally overdetermined site in the genre of social documentary photography.

The decision to omit figures is perhaps most conspicuous in Webb's *Welcome Home* series, shot along Third Avenue, which shows the festooned doorways—some closed, others agape—that greeted returning soldiers (Fig. 21). Some scholars have interpreted these photographs as depictions of ominous thresholds, alluding, perhaps, more to the passage from life to death of soldiers lost overseas than to a jubilant return.¹⁹ And yet the *Welcome Home* compositions are wholly consistent within the broader context of Webb's New York oeuvre. Rather than narrow the experience of reunion temporally and personally, Webb summoned the ubiquitous wartime experience of years spent in stoic anticipation. Having closed in on the doorways, he edited out the ambient commercial hum of the city streets to focus, instead, on the unambiguous communication of sentiment.

POSTWAR PARIS

Like many of his contemporaries, Webb earned his living primarily through freelance assignments for magazines like *Fortune*, which had been founded in 1930, and for which he began working in 1946. This was the age of the photo-essay, after all, a storytelling device popular among wide-circulation periodicals but also one that corporate interests were quick to adapt to their promotional needs. Since 1943, the photographic unit of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey had been headed by Roy E. Stryker, formerly the director of the federal Resettlement Administration, later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In hiring Stryker, the oil conglomerate was moving to improve its image, which had suffered most recently from charges that it had colluded with a German chemical company.²⁰ As Stryker expressed it, the division's mandate was to document the company's global operations through "the recording and interpretations of whole environments in extensive picture series."²¹ The images from what was called the Picture File were then liberally disseminated to mass-media outlets for publication.²²

Webb joined the unit in January 1947, merging ranks with fellow photographers Gordon Parks, Esther Bubley, Russell Lee, Harold Corsini, John Vachon, and Berenice Abbott, many of them veterans of the FSA. His job took him across the United States for much of 1947 and then overseas, to Western Europe, in 1948. Between 1949 and 1952, the year Webb married his wife, Lucille (Fig. 22), he made Paris his home base, but the city had already changed considerably since his first visit in 1948. The devaluation of the franc meant that the American dollar was soaring, which resulted in a tourism boom, particularly once the positive effects of the Marshall Plan became evident.²³ Many of Webb's photographic assignments entailed documenting this economic and cultural recovery.

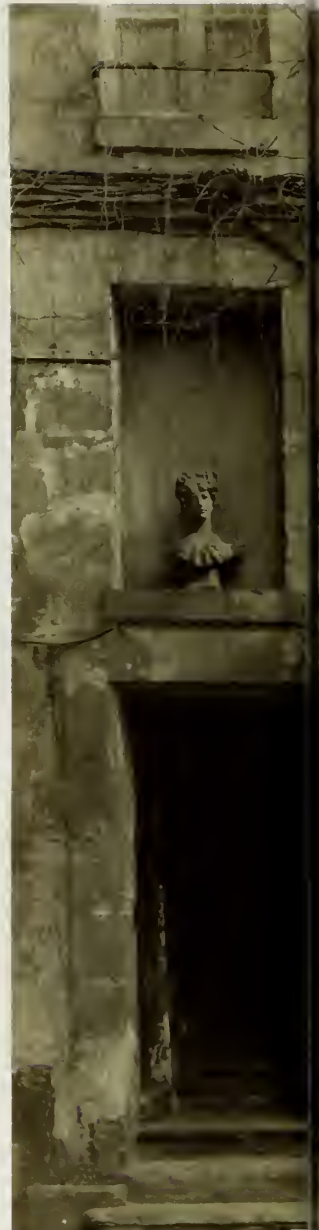


But just how did these material gains translate into photographic representations? For one, car production more than quadrupled between 1947 and 1949, meaning that the city of lights was now gripped by traffic, something in which Standard Oil, which owned Esso France, maintained a vested interest.²⁴ Although Webb enjoyed a degree of freedom in designing his assignments, the photographs were intended to be broadly illustrative of just such vehicular trends, and Stryker did rein him in on occasion. In one exchange of letters, Stryker urged him to “emphasise [sic] such things as the river and general transportation as over churches, buildings and squares” and to “remember that we need a little ‘oil’ or its equivalent—the automobile, the bus, the truck carrying sacks, food, people, etc....”²⁵



FIG. 22 Todd Webb
Four Days in Paris, 1949
Vintage gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 23 Todd Webb
In Paris U.S.-built tank trucks deliver oil products refined in France from Persian Gulf and Caribbean crude.
Published in *Photo Memo* 7 (March, 1950)
Standard Oil Company (N. J.) #65772



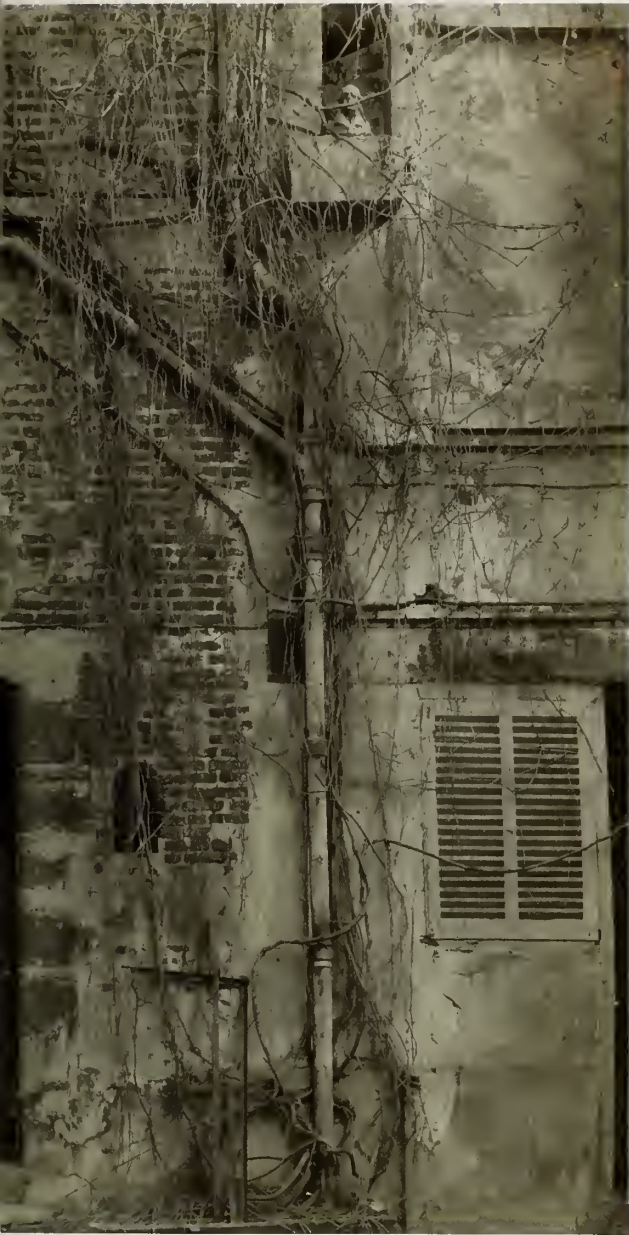


FIG. 24 Todd Webb
Sculpture Foundry, Rue des Plantes, Paris, 1950
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 25 Todd Webb
Place du Commerce, Paris, 1949
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

Although Webb contributed countless photographs to the photographic archive amassed by Standard Oil, only one of his Paris photographs was published in *Photo Memo*, the thematic journal put out by the company (Fig. 23). In the explicitness of its narrative, this composition offers an interesting counterpoint to Webb's personal photography of Paris. Stopped outside a patisserie, the emblazoned Esso truck does not interrupt quotidian Parisian life; on the contrary, it is so unremarkable that it does not elicit a glance from the circle of children or the trio of adults. The caption reads "U.S.-built tank trucks deliver oil products refined in France from Persian Gulf and Caribbean crude."²⁶ As the accompanying text underscores, and unlike in so much of Webb's own photography, commercial consummation is underway. The message that Standard Oil sought to convey about the underpinnings of the French economic resuscitation is clear.

Webb expressed trepidation about what such commercial photography would mean for his craft, writing that he was "very concerned and worried about what effect working for Standard Oil might have on my feeling about photography."²⁷ Not surprisingly, his noncommercial photography of the city assumed a markedly different character, one that could not help but evoke Atget's antiquarianism. In this image of a sculpture foundry (Fig. 24), Webb captured works of art both recently cast and already abject. He printed the image in velvety blacks that heighten the patina and emphasize the tactile properties of the sculpture, something the standing female figure signals with her gesture. Similarly, a photograph of a courtyard wall (Fig. 25) into which a female bust is recessed is a study in architectural surfaces seen, as though across time, through the filigree of hanging vines.





FIG. 26 Todd Webb
Rue Alesia, Paris (Oscar billboards), 1951
 Vintage gelatin silver print
 4 × 5 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

In Paris, just as in New York, Webb used his camera to register textures not only for physical effect, but also for their metaphoric value. In this photograph (Fig. 26), figures stride before a wall papered over with everything from casino and camping posters to Communist cries for opposition to German rearmament. In their juxtaposition, the posters, seemingly the only thing holding the crumbling wall together, present a gross asymmetry of causes and concerns. In another photograph, Webb gave prominence to a lone notice demanding “Eisenhower, Go Home!” (Fig. 27), a reference to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe responsible for the liberation of Paris. The call for Eisenhower’s retreat is tinged with the sentiment that the general had not advanced soon enough, but is also metonymic, speaking to a discomfort with the growing sphere of American influence in postwar Europe.²⁸ The door on which the poster hangs stands closed and padlocked; the other half is open, framing a disorienting and foreshortened view into the courtyard beyond. Neither passage is particularly welcoming.

In Paris, Webb immersed himself in the culture and exulted in achieving as much distance as possible from other expatriates. He mentioned infrequent associations with other photographers, Robert Capa included, who lived “as ‘American’ as possible.”²⁹ Webb’s photographs manifest the insights thus gained with a graphic sophistication, as in one representation of two quintessential and omniscient Parisian types, the street lamp and the elderly woman in mourning attire (see Fig. 8). Webb admitted to enjoying the approbation of the French, even as he saw his photographs intended for an American audience: “I try to get my Paris down too, but I wonder if it can show anyone else how it feels. One of my greatest satisfactions is that the French people like my work—many of them say, ‘This is the real Paris,’ but I want to tell Americans.”³⁰



FIG. 27 Todd Webb
Left Bank Courtyard, Paris ("Eisenhower Go Home"), 1948
Vintage gelatin silver print
5 × 7 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

ON the DOCUMENTARY

In the press release for Webb's 1946 exhibition *I See a City*, Beaumont Newhall presented him as a photographer who worked "with swift precision, directly and honestly," and maintained that Webb produced "unmanipulated contact prints" that are "historical records of obvious documentary value."³¹ With the first two statements Newhall shored up his case for the photographs belonging to the documentary genre, assuring viewers that Webb's images had been shot quickly and decisively and were not subject to editorial actions in the process of printing. Webb himself evinced the pressures of operating within this particular mode, writing in the months leading up to the exhibition: "I have started seeing myself as Webb ... the great documentarian. I start looking for things that fall into that category and I am lost."³²

By the late 1940s, the "documentary" was freighted with associations and thought by many to be too stale a conceptual category. For some the term was insufficiently inclusive and, moreover, governed by the legacy of Stryker's Farm Security Administration. As one *U.S. Camera* writer expressed it in 1948, "The aforementioned 'documentary' photography, in most cases, amounts to nothing more than a depression-developed portrayal of all that seems hopeless in life, and the barren vestiges of living."³³ Webb's aspirations came, therefore, at a particularly fraught time; the documentary practice of the 1930s either felt vitiated or, worse, invited backlash, and as Stryker's move to Standard Oil made evident, it was vulnerable to aestheticization at the hands of corporate interests. What, then, were the responsibilities, both pictorial and ethical, of the 1940s documentary photographer?

This question inspired the formation of new photographic affiliations that sought to codify the objectives for documentary photography and map its historical genealogy. New York's Photo League was essentially a cooperative organized by Paul Strand and Berenice Abbott after the dissolution, in 1936, of the Film and Photo League. Chief among the organization's founding principles was photography's social exigency: "Photography has tremendous social value. Upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today. Moreover, he must not only show us how we live, but indicate the logical development of our lives."³⁴ In other words, its obligation was not only to the present, but also to the future.

Webb was inducted into the Photo League on February 28, 1947.³⁵ Beyond offering photographers access to darkrooms and instruction, the League cultivated a dialogue through lectures and major exhibitions, from the work of the Farm Security Administration and its photographers to Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, and Europeans such as Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and John Heartfield.³⁶ Magnum Photos, founded in 1947 by Cartier-Bresson and Capa, among others, was characterized in the *Photo League Bulletin* as "a cooperative agency which was founded by a group of photographers who are tired of having their pictures not used or misused, who believe that the modern photographer is capable of carrying out a job of pictorial reporting without the aid of 16 researchers, who want their own negatives and book rights, and who want to control the captioning of their material."³⁷ Magnum's proprietary vision regarding the photographer's creative autonomy was clearly a reaction to

the concessions that publication opportunities typically imposed. Aware of the group's activities, Webb, in Paris, was actively recruited by Magnum cofounder David "Chim" Seymour: "[Seymour's] Magnum is big stuff over here. He sounds me out once in a while. But I am not ready for anything like that yet. There is a pattern there that I am not ready to fit into."³⁸

As museums began to make more robust commitments to exhibit photography, they, too, weighed in on these issues. The Museum of Modern Art had been mounting photographic exhibitions since 1932, before the formation of its photography department, and six years later organized its first one-man exhibition of photography, *American Photographs By Walker Evans*. For essayist Lincoln Kirstein, Evans's work embodied the purest strain of documentary reportage. Kirstein argued this, in part, by way of analogy to Atget and nineteenth-century American photographer Mathew Brady: "Walker Evans is giving us the contemporary civilization of eastern America and its dependencies as Atget gave us Paris before the war and as Brady gave us the War between the States."³⁹ Even in 1938 Kirstein viewed Atget through the proleptic lens of the First World War and, by the transitive logic of these analogies, saw him as the chronicler of a culture that at the time was already irretrievable. For Kirstein, Evans embodied a documentary mode divorced from social progressivism and resistant to decorativeness—and, as a result, to commodification: "Such photography is not presentable as an accent for a wall: there is hardly ever any purchaser for the unrelieved, bare-faced, revelatory fact."⁴⁰ Evans's photographs do indeed exhibit an extreme pictorial bluntness (Fig. 28), especially compared to Webb's. He rarely attempted to organize a composition with any obvious artistry, preferring instead to exaggerate the bald, planar frontality of his subjects and often falling back on symmetry as if to relay his objectivity.



FIG. 28 Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975)
Greek Revival Doorway, New York City, 1934, 1934
Gelatin silver print
7⁹/₁₆ × 5³/₄ inches
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

FIG. 29 Todd Webb
125th Street, New York, 1946
Vintage gelatin silver print
5 × 7 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb







Within this contested terrain, Webb's work seems to stake out a new, almost anthropological space for itself. As he later wrote, "For me, the commonplace in its constancy of occurrence is the dramatic. It is the major portion of our lives. Every window, doorway, street, building, every mark on a wall, every sign, has a human connotation. All are signs and symbols of people, a way of life, living in our time."⁴¹ Where the photographs made for Standard Oil's Picture File construe social relationships as the by-products of a thriving capitalist marketplace, thereby rationalizing it, Webb's photographs instead scrutinize spaces, many of them in transition, for evidence of other social expressions. A crude figure scrawled on a wall (Fig. 29), the hermetic facade of a paint shop that is itself a tableau (Fig. 30), a building dwarfed by billboards (Fig. 31): these are some of the myriad ways in which members of a society communicate with one another. It is this social connective tissue that fascinated Webb. Newhall, recognizing Webb's capacity for subtlety, applauded the photographer for imbuing his work with "personal interpretations, through which he has imparted to us warmth of appreciation and the excitement of visual discovery."⁴²

FIG. 30 Todd Webb
Paint Store, Paris, 1950
 Gelatin silver print
 8 × 10 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

FIG. 31 Todd Webb
Lexington at 125th St., Harlem, New York, 1946
 Gelatin silver print
 16 × 20 inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb





FIG. 32 Todd Webb
Mr. Perkins Pierce Arrow, Harlem, NY, 1946
Gelatin silver print
8 × 10 inches
Evans Gallery and
Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb



FIG. 33 Todd Webb
Harlem Slum Clearance, New York, 1946
 Gelatin silver print
 4½ × 6½ inches
 Evans Gallery and
 Estate of Todd and Lucille Webb

A photograph by Webb of a cherry vendor and his cart on the streets of Paris appeared in *The New York Times* in 1953 with the following caption: “Reminiscent of the work of Eugène Atget, this picture was taken by Todd Webb during a recent sojourn in France.” When Webb was selected to participate in Edward Steichen’s second *Diogenes with a Camera* exhibition, held at The Museum of Modern Art in 1952, his work elicited a similar observation.⁴³ Atget’s work—which had been given renewed visibility in 1951 when Berenice Abbott exhibited two hundred of his prints at the New School for Social Research, where she taught—clearly remained in the public eye. The city depicted within Atget’s images was, in one mention, characterized as “so different from the table-jammed, tourist-crowded region of that name today.”⁴⁴

Atget, as an intermediary in the supply chain of documentary images, functioned in a similarly necessary role within the photographic discourse of midcentury. Especially after the Second World War, he possessed currency as a romantic symbol of a world out of reach. In looking again at Webb’s photography—while considering, at the same time, the ways in which Atget’s oeuvre was marshaled—one becomes aware of the extent to which

analogy risks dissolving historical contingency. Comparing Webb to Atget suppressed the historical specificity of Webb’s work in the interests of assimilating it to a putatively objective practice. Webb certainly drew upon Atget, but he did so adaptively, and the space between their respective oeuvres is more interesting than their superposition. In his incredibly dense imagery of New York and Paris, Webb was always looking at form, but also looking through it.

Webb’s photographs perhaps most resemble an archaeological record, stratified but also simultaneous, and it does not seem incidental that the principle of simultaneity is antithetical to the sequential logic of industrial production. In *Slum Clearance* (Fig. 33), Webb captured an act of suspended demolition. A housing block has been partially razed, its corridor now choked with rubble. Strikingly composed so that the destruction washes up at arm’s length from the viewing position, the image alludes to the vigorous postwar redevelopment initiated by Robert Moses in 1946. Here, as in the best of his photographs, Webb presents us with a symbol of revitalization and a scene that, in its classical order, partakes of the pathos of the ruin.

NOTES

1. *U.S. Camera Annual 1947* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), p. 247.
2. Quoted in Keith Davis, "Todd Webb: An Appreciation," in *Todd Webb: Photographs of New York and Paris* (Kansas City: Hallmark Cards, Inc., 1986), p. 114.
3. Max Kozloff summarizes the degree to which the photographic communities of both cities looked to one another: "As a metropolis that enjoyed extraordinary fame in the history of 20th century photography, New York had a rival—and a glorious one at that. Paris was the sister capital of modern times. The international genre of street photography is unthinkable without the push initially given it in Paris: what New York photographers learned from Atget and Cartier-Bresson was incalculable." See Kozloff, *New York: Capital of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press and New York: The Jewish Museum, 2002), p. 46.
4. Jacob Deschin, "New York's Streets; Making Picture Stories of the City's Avenues," *New York Times* (April 6, 1947), p. 13.
5. On Abbott's efforts on behalf of Atget, see, most recently, Clark Woswick, *Berenice Abbott and Eugène Atget* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2002), and Peter Barberie, *Looking at Atget* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). On Julien Levy's New York gallery and its role in promoting Atget's photography, see Katherine Ware and Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006).
6. Todd Webb, *Looking Back: Memoirs and Photographs* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p. 28.
7. See, most famously, Abigail Solomon-Godeau's chapter on Atget, "Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugène Atget," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 28–51.
8. In its broadest institutionalized sense, "street photography" has come to refer to a mode of candid urban photography. It is, as Patricia Vittel-Becker has indicated, "a designation of space rather than intent." At the time that Webb initiated his photographic career, this subset of the documentary was not yet codified as such. See Patricia Vittel-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 68. On the history of street photography, see Joel Meyerowitz and Colin Westerbeck, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994).
9. Several reviewers of Webb's New York and Paris photography remarked upon his talent for obviating touristic superficiality and, at the other extreme, overt commentary. See, for example, George Gelberg, "'I See a City': An Exhibition by Todd Webb," *Photo Notes* (October 1946), p. 2.
10. Webb, *Looking Back*, p. 18.
11. Stieglitz's photogravure features a locomotive advancing along a track that similarly wends its way to the foreground of the image. Of making his photograph, which suggests an updating of Stieglitz's image and embodies Webb's fascination with the elevated train system, he wrote: "I tried to make a photograph of the Third Avenue El from the Fulton Street station. The platform seems to be constantly shaking from the passage of the trains. It was just luck to get a sharp photograph with a camera on a tripod. It is one of the more obvious I have done with the exception, maybe, of the Brooklyn Bridge." See Webb, *Looking Back*, p. 34.
12. Berenice Abbott, quoted in Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: The New Press and the Museum of the City of New York, 1997), p. 21.
13. Webb, *Looking Back*, p. 36.
14. *U.S. Camera Annual 1947*, p. 247.
15. Of this series, Webb wrote: "I have been photographing freely and have had some periods of staleness. To beat that I created a project to make photographs of numbers. Any place at all, on houses, streetcars, any place as long as I can isolate the number to be the only recognizable symbol in the print." Webb, *Looking Back*, pp. 58–59.
16. Whether Webb recognized it or not, such images of unpeopled streets would also have evoked the journalistic iconography of labor strikes. *U.S. Camera*, for example, devoted a section of its 1947 annual (the same issue in which Webb's photograph *Third Avenue Street Cars* was reproduced) to news coverage of the previous year's record number of industrial actions. Photographs of the ten-day tugboat strike of February 1946, which forced the mayor to shut down the city because of the resulting fuel shortage, registered the severity of the strike in terms of the sheer barrenness of the city streets. See, for example, "A Tugboat Strike Paralyzes New York," *U.S. Camera Annual 1947*, p. 102.
17. Ferd Reyher, "Atget," *Photo Notes* (Fall 1948), pp. 16–17.
18. For the most thorough compendium and discussion of Atget's types, see Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

19. Alexander Nemerov, "Coming Home in 1945: Reading Robert Frost and Norman Rockwell," *American Art* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 66. He goes on to write, "Coming home, in Webb's photographs, is to experience a living memorialization."
20. Nicholas Lemann, *Out of the Forties* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 21.
21. Memo from Roy E. Stryker to E. Newsom, August 1943. Quoted in Ulrich Keller, *The Highway as Habitat: A Roy Stryker Documentation, 1943-1955* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, 1986), p. 30.
22. Jonathan Day describes the viral reach of the Standard Oil Picture File: "It served the company's public relations department, which was charged with providing publicity images wherever and whenever they were wanted. The File's images were exploited extensively. The Civil Affairs Division of the U.S. Army, for example, used them to illustrate 'the American Way of Life to People Overseas'.... They featured in *Life*, *Look* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, among other magazines and newspapers. In 1949 alone, 667 Standard Oil File pictures were carried by the press. Textbooks and encyclopaedias also used the photographs. Another popular means of dissemination was panel-mounted display sequences." See Robert Frank's *The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 115.
23. Antony Beevor and Artemis Cooper, *Paris After the Liberation: 1944-1949* (New York: Penguin Putnam), p. 361.
24. According to Beevor and Cooper: "Car production rose from 5,000 cars in 1947 to over 20,000 by the end of 1949. The rapid increase in traffic, and in the noise of klaxons, produced the most striking change, especially in the centre of Paris, where fewer and fewer bicycles were to be seen." Beevor and Cooper, *Paris After the Liberation*, pp. 370-71.
25. Roy Stryker, letter to Todd Webb, July 8, 1949. This and the subsequent letters cited belong to the Roy Stryker Papers, Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Kentucky.
26. *Photo Memo: From the Picture Files of the Standard Oil Co. (N.J.)* no. 7 (March 1950), p. 7.
27. Todd Webb, "A Reminiscence: The New York and Paris Years," in *Todd Webb: Photographs of New York and Paris: 1945-1960*, p. 10.
28. Public opinion in France skewed so that nearly half of the French citizens polled believed the Marshall Plan's primary intent was the expansion of American market interests. See Beevor and Cooper, *Paris After the Liberation*, p. 353. Webb describes eating out in Paris and how it had begun to encroach upon his productivity because he "wouldn't be through until 10 or so and then I always seemed to get into some discussion about America or France or the Marshall Plan or the Atlantic Pact or photography or painting and by the time I got home from dinner it would be 11 or later—too late to start work in the dark room." Todd Webb to Roy Stryker, April 20, 1949.
29. Todd Webb to Roy Stryker, April 28, 1949.
30. Todd Webb to Roy Stryker, June 5, 1949.
31. Quoted in Davis, "Todd Webb: An Appreciation," p. 102.
32. Webb, *Looking Back*, p. 49.
33. "Todd Webb's New York," *U.S. Camera Annual 1948*, pp. 285-6.
34. *Photo Notes* (August 1938), p. 1. On the Photo League, see Anne Wilkes Tucker's pioneering scholarship, including *This was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001), and *The Photo League, 1936-1951* (New York: Gallery Association of New York State, 1987).
35. *The Photo League Bulletin* (April 1947), p. 4.
36. For a complete list of the exhibitions organized by the League, see Tucker, *This was the Photo League*, pp. 148-51.
37. "A New Deal for Photographers," *Photo Notes* (July 1947), p. 4.
38. Todd Webb to Roy Stryker, January 25, 1950.
39. Lincoln Kirstein, "Photographs of America: Walker Evans," *Walker Evans American Photographs*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 193.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
41. Quoted in Jacob Deschin, "Second in a Series: Museum Exhibit Connects Photography and Truth," *New York Times* (November 30, 1952), p. 15.
42. Quoted in Davis, "Todd Webb: An Appreciation," p. 102.
43. See Deschin, p. 15: "The French pictures are strongly reminiscent of the work of Eugene Atget."
44. "Yesterday's Paris—Plus Ça [sic] Change," *New York Times* (November 25, 1951), p. 235.

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