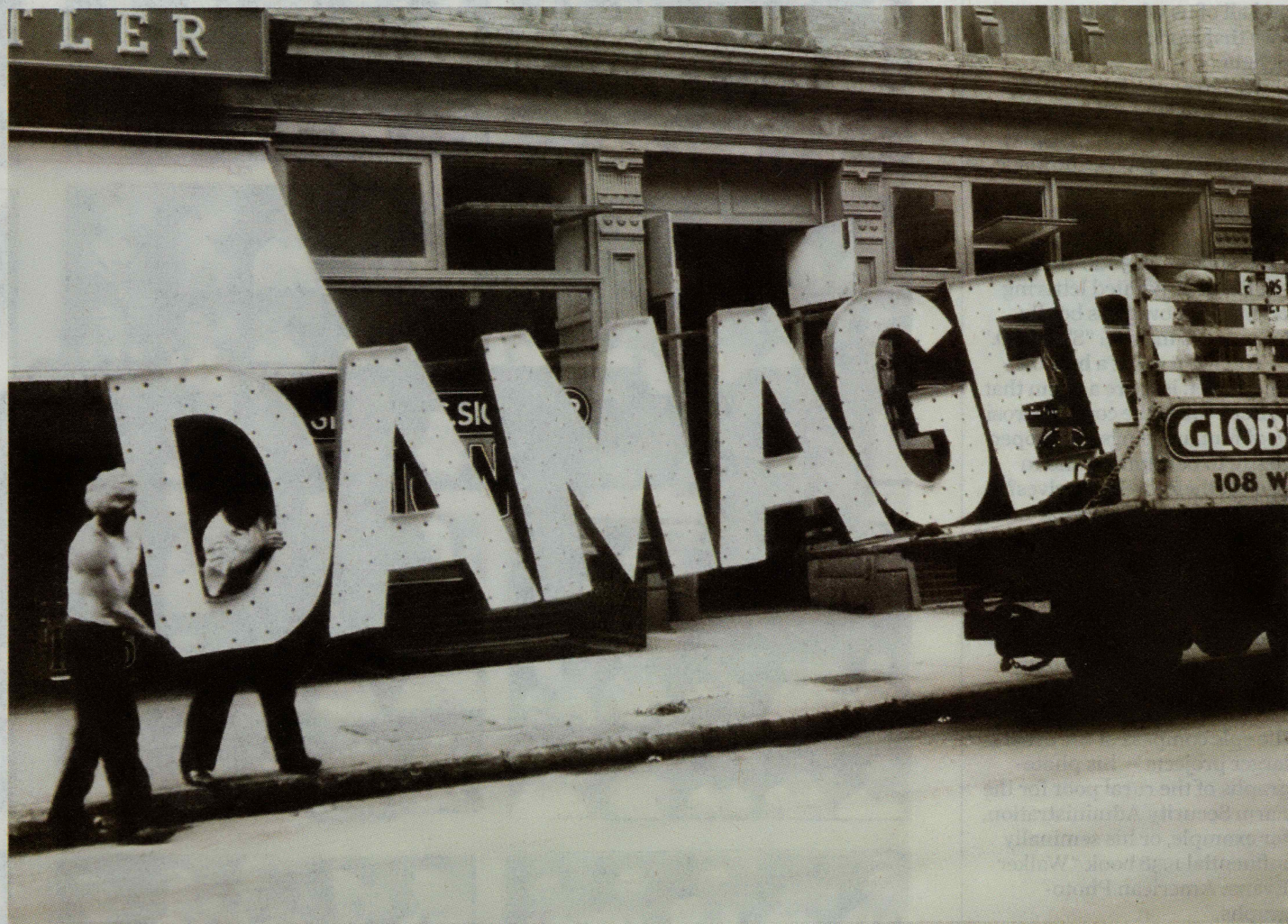




© Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art photos

Walker Evans' "Truck and Sign" (1928-30) reveals the photographer's keen eye for culture and detail.

ART REVIEW

Plodding display of powerful collection

Overwhelming volume dilutes impact of Walker Evans' photos at SFMOMA

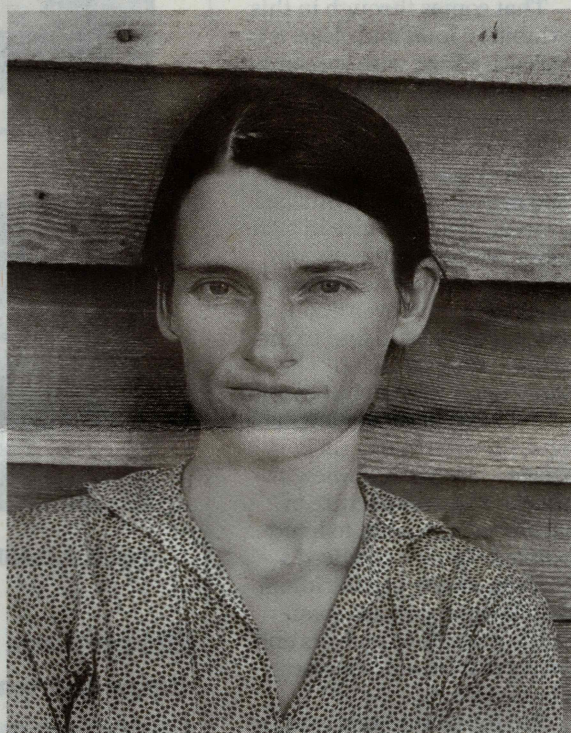
By Charles Desmarais

That the photographer Walker Evans was one of the most important American artists of the 20th century is beyond dispute. His influence, starting in the 1930s, has been inestimable, not only on his primary medium and other visual art, but on fields from journalism to geography. His pictures helped to shape the way we remember our past; how we see and describe our world today; and what we value in

Walker Evans: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, Saturday, Sept. 30-Feb. 4. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

our environment, both material and social.

You might not get all that, though, from the ponderously thorough Evans retrospective that opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on Saturday,



"Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of a Cotton Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama" (1936) is an example of Evans' revelatory portraiture.

Sept. 30, and is on view through Feb. 4. It is the debut exhibition effort of Clément Chéroux, the museum's new senior curator of photography. He organized it for his former employer, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where it showed before traveling here.

What one hopes for, with such historically significant material as has been gathered here, is a charge of some sort — a thrilling experience of discovery, a visual rush, a

Evans continues on E2

Walker Evans' works as avalanche

Evans from page E1

recognition of original thought or true feeling. Evans certainly found those things in his work, and all of us who have grown to love that work have shared his delight.

We have seen it in a single moment, as when we first came upon "Penny Picture Display, Savannah," a picture he made in 1936. It depicts a window and, through the glass, pressed against it, 15 grids of 15 portrait head shots — 225 sub-images in all. Reverse-painted lettering on the window glass boldly announces the site: "STUDIO."

We might call it a humble image. Yet, is there a poem that better evokes the core generosity of human beings, their open desire to be admired and to project their loveliest selves? A history of the Depression-era South more concise in its tale of white codependency in its cultural addiction to privilege? A treatise on the social history of art more accurate in describing our need to picture ourselves?

We have delighted, too, in the epic compass of the artist's larger projects — his photographs of the rural poor for the Farm Security Administration, for example, or his seminal influential 1938 book "Walker Evans: American Photographs."

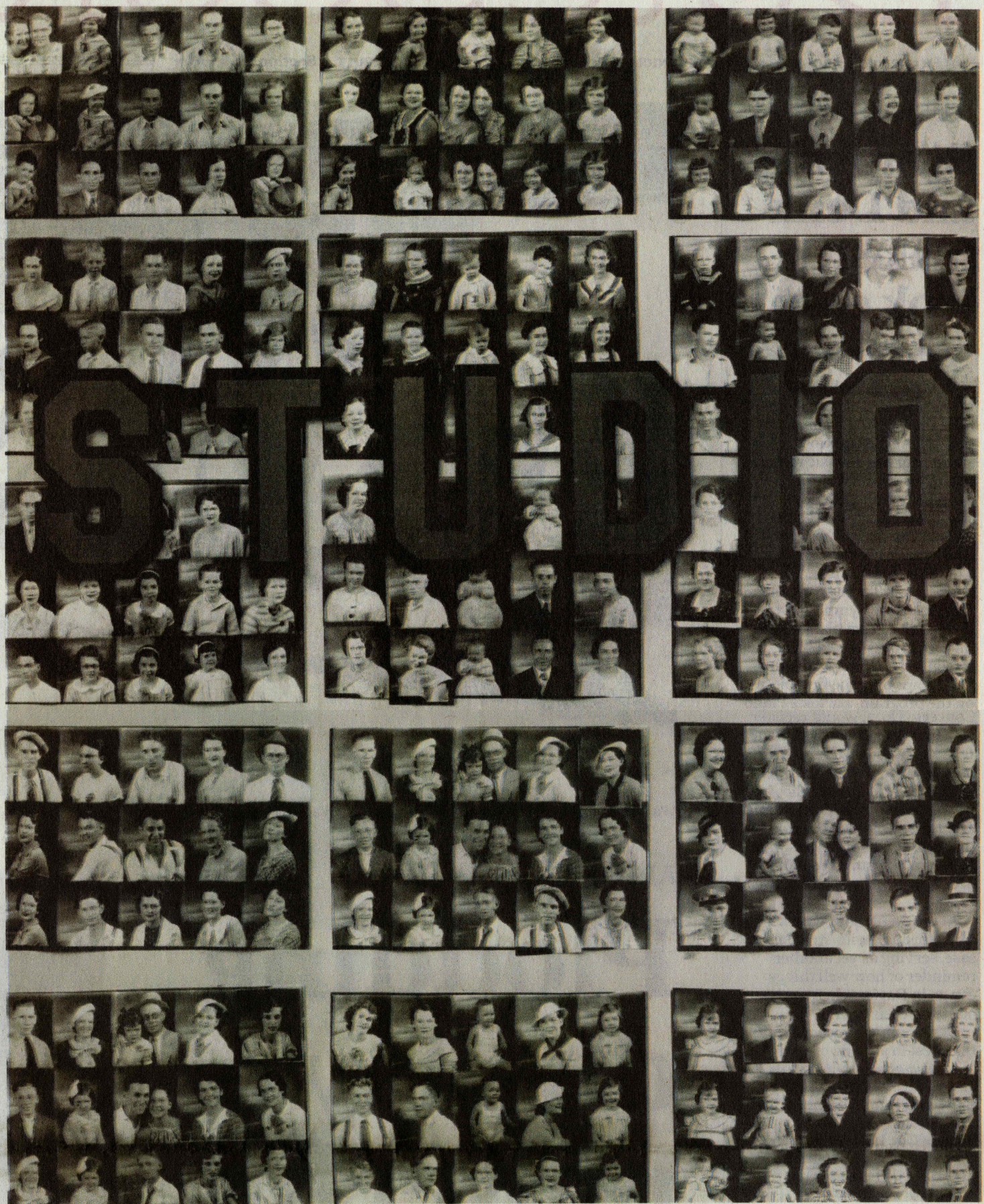
Evans most loved two things about photography: its omnivorous hunger for detail and its fundamental democracy.

That comes through in this exhibition loud and clear: It is a massive effort, with something like 400 objects displayed. And that is its greatest flaw.

The great pictures are all here in impeccable versions. The prints, whether vintage in provenance or precise in technique (rarely both — Evans honed his understanding of darkroom craft over time), are as close as we will find to the artist's original vision. The show has a relaxed but credible (if not new) point of view: That a "vernacular" cultural language — from rough-hewn shacks and architecture of tarnished splendor, to hand-painted signs — required a corresponding artistic idiom drawn upon popular postcards, homely snapshots and pictures from corner-store photo parlors.

But for all the show and its lavish, 320-page catalog make of the Walker Evans "eye," what is missing here is an equivalent curatorial authority. An exhibition can't cover an artist's every project, theme and influence without burying the art under an avalanche of information. That we have endured such a landslide, unfortunately, is the sense with which we finish the march through SFMOMA's far-flung photography galleries, every one of which is devoted to the Evans show.

Evans was a collector, which the show abundantly makes clear by including many postcards, signs and the like from the Evans archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That is also the way he photographed, making multiple images of the same subject, returning repeatedly to small-town Main Streets, roadside stores and churches, any-



© Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art photos

The S.F. exhibit includes "Penny Picture Display, Savannah" (1936) with multilayered insights on the Depression-era South.

His pictures helped to shape the way we remember our past, how we see and describe our world today.

mous faces on streets and subways. He was less devoted to the singular exemplar than to the comprehensive array.

The exhibition takes much the same approach. Why show four examples from a series, it implicitly asks, when you can find room for 24?

Though they share a common scholarly ancestry, however, the archivist's role is the opposite of that of today's curator. The first amasses, the latter selects.

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"Subway Portrait" (1938-41) is among Evans photos on view at S.F. Museum of Modern Art.