

"This Is Worth Noting"

Art and Literature in Arnie Jarmak's Photographs

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PHOTOGRAPHY WAS BORN WITH an identity crisis, with even the most vocal and articulate among its various independent inventors unable to establish a fixed, coherent identity for the new medium.¹ This multivalent origin contributed to photography's uniqueness among representational mediums, and to its wide adoption not just in diverse modes—expressive and applied—but by diverse professionals, amateur enthusiasts, and casual hobbyists alike.

Arnie Jarmak's photographs remind us that it is more productive to treat photography's complex identity as a set of expansive possibilities rather than an inherently contradictory existence. The photographs included in this catalogue and the McMullen Museum of Art exhibition it accompanies were for the most part made in the course of Jarmak's work as chief photographer for the *Chelsea Record* in the late 1970s and 1980s. They picture the events and inhabitants of a small city during a relatively brief period. Thus, in their motivation and subject matter they represent a focus that is precise and narrow in geography, culture, and time. And yet, that

narrowness belies a rich array of influences and references. Jarmak's approach to photography was shaped by both fine art and journalistic photography, as well as by literature and scholarly writing in a variety of fields.

Arnie Jarmak's story is one that at some points reflects well-established developments in late twentieth-century history, and at just as many others departs from expectations in surprising ways. He was among the last generation of daily newspaper photographers responsible not only for virtually all the paper's photographs, but also the printing and transferring of those photographs to the printing press. But following this period, on the cusp of radical transformation for photographers and newspapers, Jarmak left photography behind for other pursuits well outside the field, emphasizing the time-capsule quality of both his work and its situation in the pre-digital era. Jarmak's years at the *Chelsea Record* were transformative ones for photography, as well as for newspapers and Chelsea. We can understand the changing demographics and politics of Chelsea—which both destabilized the city economically and simultaneously

introduced vibrant new communities, sowing the seeds for future growth²—as symbolically analogous to the rocky transformation from film to digital photography. They are likewise reflected in the transformation of the American newspaper as it was similarly destabilized and transformed by the rise of the internet.

Arnie Jarmak's photographs of Chelsea were not made in an aesthetic void. His social and photographic interests were born out of a particular set of influences, many resulting from his autodidacticism. This tendency formed early and then took shape following his years at Lehigh University where, by his own admission, he was "not that focused on academics."³ His voracious reading and looking during his early twenties resulted in a body of work that reflects a rich array of photographic styles and innovations, particularly those associated with documentary practices, albeit ones heavily inflected by fine art ambitions and practices. We see elements of Diane Arbus, Eugene Smith, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis. And, most prominently, we see the lessons of Walker Evans (1903–75), whom Jarmak recognizes as the most influential and inspiring photographer he encountered in his personal curriculum. He recalled, "Evans was the first, and the one whose work somehow touched something in me that nothing in my life had ever done in quite the same way."⁴

Jarmak remembers being moved by Evans's ability to capture a record of every-

day life through a medium that could tell difficult stories with beauty. That Evans's photographs were no less beautiful for including life's quirks and sorrows was similarly exciting for Jarmak, who was looking for alternative life paths, as the ones laid out for him by his family and society were made increasingly unappealing amidst the social upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵ It was during the period following his graduation in 1972, working for his family's business, that he began to visit bookstores, where he was often drawn to books of photography.

Among those books was a volume on Walker Evans, recently published in 1971 by the Museum of Modern Art and edited by the museum's director of photography, John Szarkowski. Accompanying reproductions of work made over the preceding forty years was his description of Evans's contribution, one that might have helped inform Jarmak's future practice: "He thought of photography as a way of preserving segments of time itself, without regard for the conventional structures of picture building. Nothing was to be imposed on experience; the truth was to be discovered, not constructed."⁶ That is to say, Evans embodied a photographic practice that seeks to reflect living in the moment, rather than shaping the experience and its presentation through one's own set of expectations, which would necessarily be a reflection of the past. As part of a generation looking for new paths forward, this approach would have appealed to Jarmak, and served as encouragement for the spontaneity that defines much of



1. WALKER EVANS, *A GRAVEYARD AND Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, 1935.

his best work in Chelsea.

Among the photographs reproduced in Szarkowski's catalogue was Evans's well-known 1935 photograph *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania* (fig. 1), depicting the city in which Jarmak attended college. It fed the future photographer's growing interest in philosophy and sociology and the ways they could be embedded in photography. The photograph describes the attributes of a working life in the industrial city, encompassing Bethlehem Steel smokestacks, Saint Michael's Cemetery in South Bethlehem, and a strip of duplex row houses squeezed between the two. Grander dwellings look down from hills beyond, introducing shades of class tension in a picture otherwise devoted to the working lives and deaths of American laborers. A lone and blurry figure appears on a rooftop in the middle ground, with a vantage point that mirrors the pho-

tographer's, encompassing the strong verticals of the dark factory spires and brightly lit stone crosses that address viewers from the picture's foreground. While Jarmak's photographs tend to focus on individual experiences, he credits Evans with this model of a brilliant, beautiful image showing at once where people worked, lived, and died. This picture, and others like it, made Evans's work the biggest factor in Jarmak's desire to be a photographer.⁷ It comes as no surprise, then, that we can find in Jarmak's photographs different strands of Evans's work. This is not to suggest a one-to-one influence, but rather that Evans established an approach characterized by diverse subjects treated with a variety of formal means. This ended up being a workable and productive model for Jarmak.

While his photographs do not have the geographical reach of Evans's, Jarmak took a wide-ranging formal approach to picturing a small and evolving community. In Jarmak's closely cropped portraits, with their direct, frontal address, it is tempting to see echoes of Evans's similarly framed portraits of sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama, in 1936 (fig. 2). They share, too, an interest in painted signage as evidence of a local vernacular.⁸ Jarmak's *Arrow Sign Service* (plate 65), which offers at once evidence of commercial decay and ingenuity, is among the best examples of this tendency.⁹ The cracked or dust-streaked windows, warped siding, and rampant weeds contrast with the care taken in the painting of sleekly crafted signage. The word *sign* appears five times here, each



2. WALKER EVANS, *ALLIE MAE Burroughs, Wife of a Cotton Sharecropper*, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.

articulated differently, with precise outlines or shadows or serifs, blocky capitals or playful flowing script. Even the street number has been carefully painted inside a bright rectangle on the peeling paneled front door.

In many of Jarmak's Chelsea pictures, determination and pride appear along with anxiety or resignation. During the transitional period in Chelsea that was ultimately the subject of his newspaper work, the city's toughness came up against a long series of declines. Thus, another quality is shared with Evans, who came into his own as a photographer as he witnessed the failed promise of the inter-war years come into focus during the 1930s, and articulated in his photographs parallels with the similarly failed ambitions embed-

ded in the grand but crumbling architecture of the antebellum American South. Jarmak was enamored of Chelsea's human spirit and driven by a desire to reflect the distinct beauty of the community for the *Record's* readers, but he also intended to picture the city's difficulties, evidence of social inequality and struggle. Perhaps out of a desire to avoid associating the exuberant humanity of his portrait subjects with the city's economic plight, his pictures of Chelsea's urban spaces tend—like so many of Evans's pictures of related subjects—to be unpeopled (see plate 64 or 72). While his photographs of children especially teem with life, and still others depict an aging population patronizing or running traditional businesses, there is a distinct vein of facades that offer an impression of long abandonment. Despite the optimistic slogan on Joel Pressman's cheerful billboard: "Pardon the temporary inconvenience...but...we're turning a city around!" (plate 73), in Jarmak's Chelsea there is abundant evidence of blight. The eerie emptiness of his elevated and street views alike is in sharp contrast with the rich cultural life depicted elsewhere in his body of work.

Evans also provided a productive model for Jarmak in a number of ways apart from his photographs. Before Evans began making photographs in a committed way at the end of the 1920s, he was more focused on writers than painters or photographers, and spent a transformative year in Paris that included abundant time in bookshops reading Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Joyce. Flaubert's

realism and naturalism were especially influential, demonstrating a refreshing objectivity in the way he treated his subjects and, significantly, what Evans called "the non-appearance" of the author,¹⁰ both qualities he would apply decisively in his photographs. By the time Jarmak encountered the book of Evans photographs he was also making his independent way through the Western canon of literature as well as psychology and economic and social theory. In the late 1970s he read Sigmund Freud, Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Charles Darwin, among others, and found in each of their texts brilliant thinking, as well as the ability to express complex ideas with exceptional clarity. When Jarmak read an argument that was able, as he described it, to "pierce through the subject,"¹¹ he would copy down passages. It was during these years that he began to make his first photographs, and he started to notice relationships forming between the passages in his notebooks and his pictures. The meaning he found in his photographs "seemed somehow mixed with"¹² the content of his favorite texts, and the two began to serve and support one another. Images were infused with ideas and in turn supported new connections between text and experience. He began casually pairing excerpts from Smith and others with his own photographs, sometimes consciously making a photograph to illustrate a particular economic theory, at other times finding resonances that emerged later on. In particular, it was the photographs that drew a viewer's attention to something that did not look quite

as it should—and in so doing suggested that appearances and reality did not precisely align—that spoke most directly to his collection of quotations. He began to pair up small prints with typewritten lines or paragraphs, mounting them on sheets of black paper as the first step of a book project, one to which he has returned with renewed interest in recent years (fig. 3¹³).

Among the thinkers whose ideas Jarmak absorbed, Voltaire was the most important. He was inspired by Voltaire's intellectual



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Adam Smith, *The Wealth Of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter II, of Restraints

3. MONOPOLY, C. 1977–79.

ambition, and the diversity of his interests, as well as his apparent fearlessness when it came to writing social criticism in a period of great social upheaval that eventually led to new democratic experiments and freedoms. Jarmak read as much of Voltaire's written work as he could find, and after he started working for the *Chelsea Record* found ways to “sneak in” his own social critique among photographs that simultaneously celebrated the beauty and tenacity of Chelsea and its citizens.¹⁴

He also credits nineteenth-century novelists including Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Herman Melville for ultimately helping to define his mission as a photographer. Their moving descriptions of the everyday lives of working people drove his desire to immerse himself in Chelsea and to develop relationships with its spaces, institutions, and inhabitants. Scott's novels were among the earliest to bring ordinary people into the field of representation and present them as fully realized, three-dimensional characters. He situated them in a realistic social world, built around historical references rather than fantasy. Instead of serving an ornamental purpose, the closely observed details that enlivened his novels were central to the ways their narratives unfolded.¹⁵ This approach was subsequently adopted by Dickens, who is similarly credited with accurately and objectively portraying poverty, albeit a version enhanced by a strong element of sentimentality. While Dickens wrote from a position outside the social sphere of his working class characters,

he also drew on experiences from his childhood, and his subjects retain their dignity. In *Moby Dick*, finally, Melville brings the social world of ordinary sailors alive through meticulously described detail, making his characters relatable and alive through the material aspects of their lives. If Evans drew on Flaubert's realism as a model for his photography, Scott, Dickens, and Melville, along with Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo, provided a similar literary model for Jarmak, particularly shaping his approach to picturing working-class subjects.¹⁶ This led him to represent Chelsea's inhabitants with dignity, taking care to present their individual stories with clarity, honesty, and respect.

Part of this tendency stems from the fact that Jarmak lived in Chelsea for ten years and developed friendships with his subjects. Although he had grown up elsewhere, and in different socioeconomic circumstances, his years in Chelsea gradually made him part of the city's fabric, and made possible the intimacy that is often visible in his portraits, both because the locals trusted him and because he worked so hard to understand the city and its people. This explains the openness we see in the eyes of his portrait subjects, a characteristic that distinguishes them from the wary gaze of Allie Mae Burroughs and other farmers photographed by Evans (fig. 2).

Indeed, despite a number of shared experiences, beliefs, and formal tendencies, Jarmak's approach departed from Evans's in important ways. Evans was suspicious of the term *documentary*, calling it “inexact,

vague, and even grammatically weak...a very sophisticated and misleading word” and around the time Jarmak discovered his photographs proposed *documentary style* to better describe his work.¹⁷ The term denoted art that had adopted the style of a photographic document. Jarmak’s work does not betray the same discomfort, nor Evans’s belief that “a document has use, whereas art is really useless.”¹⁸ Instead, Jarmak embraced the possibility of a photographic practice that drew on art to support social examination, and ultimately to celebrate humanity. The movement and life that animate so many of his pictures, particularly those depicting groups (plate 57 or 101), rarely appear in Evans’s body of work.

The evident joy and delight in humanity that characterizes so much of Jarmak’s work, and which appears even in the face of hardship, is a phenomenon more familiar from Humanist Photography, with its unembarrassed emotional affect. That international movement, closely associated with France in the postwar decades, was made up of warm, romantic, often poetic responses to the devastation of recent history. This work empathetically pictured and celebrated human behavior and relationships with all their idiosyncrasies. The movement, loosely defined and without official membership, encompassed a diverse group of photographers from Henri Cartier-Bresson to W. Eugene Smith.¹⁹ Even a figure like William Klein (1928–), whose often cynical approach might seem to prevent his association, presents a relevant model (see *Baseball Cards*, New York, 1955 [fig. 4], or



4. WILLIAM KLEIN, *BASEBALL CARDS*,
New York, 1955.

Three Girls Laughing and Tongues, New York, 1955). When we look at photographs like Jarmak’s *The Counter at Riley’s Roast Beef* (plate 78), *First Communion* (plate 106), *Lower Broadway Cops and Robbers* (plate 104), or especially *School Kids* (plate 103), we see a similarly celebratory and delighted response to urban life. The photographs draw on dynamic composition to make a strong visual statement that undercuts any tendency toward the saccharine qualities viewers might typically associate with similar subject matter.

Viewers looking at Jarmak’s photographs for the first time are unlikely to be shocked by his early interest in Evans or Lewis Hine. But the books he found and brought home to study during his post-collegiate years introduce unexpected names as well. Among the influences that may be as surprising as they are illuminating is his early admiration for Diane Arbus, whose photographs of social outsiders and outcasts have been the subject

of both strenuous critique and celebration, inviting, on one hand, angry condemnation and accusations of exploitation,²⁰ and on the other, claims of extreme empathy and humanity.²¹ Jarmak likely saw the 1972 *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*, which was published in conjunction with a posthumous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. He recalled of the eighty pictures it contained: “That work was just unbelievable. She took parts of society that people weren’t interested in and people tried to stay away from and she just brought it to life and said, ‘This is worth noting. This is a part of life that we have to be aware of.’”²² When we see Jarmak’s *Man in Bellingham Square* (plate 87) or *Man on Broadway*, *Blizzard of ’78* (plate 88), we are reminded of the difficulty photographers encounter in navigating these dynamics: Is it possible to photograph a person who—because of appearance or circumstances—is an outsider, without exploiting that person? Can a degree of photographic objectivity ever be reached wherein the responsibility for checking one’s judgment or tendency to voyeurism is shifted to the viewer from the photographer? Ideally the photographer would have the permission and cooperation of the subject, which is the case here, as well as an empathetic approach representing the subject, a recognition of their humanity made visible in the final print. Yet we also know that it is crucial to take stock of the power dynamics at play in the picture’s making and display. In her widely cited essay on this subject, Martha Rosler denies the possibility of

a photographer functioning as an objective observer, as well as the possibility that a photograph's meaning could ever be detached from the economic or institutional contexts in which it is seen and interpreted.²³ What invisible structures of social and economic power determine the relationships between subject, photographer, and subsequent viewer? For Jarmak, his sense of identification with his subjects defined the relationship. He was not a detached observer, but rather was granted access to his subjects through existing relationships built up over years. At the time, apart from its publication in the *Record*, there was little interest in his work, either from galleries or collectors, and this absence of external recognition resonated with Jarmak's assessment of Chelsea's own identity. For him, "It was a Chelsea thing. We're proud of who we are even though nobody wants us."²⁴ That shared identity shaped around the perceived absence of an interested audience does not answer all the questions introduced by social documentary photography. It does, however, help viewers understand the nature of Jarmak's practice and the dynamic with his subjects that made his portraits so successful.

Other expansions of traditional documentary photography had less of an impact on Jarmak. While he was inspired by Arbus's directness, he admired her fellow New Documentary photographers Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander without drawing from or building on their innovations. And when New Photojournalism began to emerge in the early 1980s, with the content of traditional

photojournalism presented using styles more closely associated with artistic than journalistic practices, and emphasizing the ambiguities of experience over traditional narratives, Jarmak retained a style defined by the presentation of unambiguous narratives and relatable human connection.

When Jarmak made these photographs, his audience was limited to readers of the *Record*: "My images were really important to me and they came out in the paper and my audience was the people of the city of Chelsea. They weren't that high up on the socioeconomic ladder, but the people in Chelsea were very real and they could spot a phony a hundred feet away. They were down-to-earth, real people." When Jarmak returned to these photographs decades later, the potential audience had expanded, as had the perspective they provide as records of a defined period of time rather than the shifting and chaotic present. Some achieve Jarmak's goal of appearing out of time, as though they could as easily have been made decades earlier,²⁵ but all of them retain their formal power. The photographs in this exhibition and catalogue share the values of clarity, narrative focus, and—most importantly—empathy. In addition to their rich engagement with literature and myriad strands of American photography, Jarmak's love for Chelsea—quirks and sorrows included—remains potently visible four decades on.

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- 1 The first workable photographic processes were announced in 1839, each of them vying for precedence and cultural relevance. The irreproducible but stunningly precise and reflective daguerreotype, and the reproducible but comparably fuzzy calotype, based on a paper negative, were the most celebrated, but during the first few decades of the nineteenth century dozens of other independent experimenters in Europe, North America, and South America also made significant strides toward what we now call photography. The material form and application of photography was thus diverse from the beginning, and continued to change throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The best account of this period is in Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Concept of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).
- 2 See Marilyn S. Johnson's essay in this volume for an examination of Chelsea's ever-changing demographics.
- 3 Arnie Jarmak, telephone interview by author, July 30, 2020.
- 4 Jarmak, interview.
- 5 See Diana Larsen's biography of Jarmak in this catalogue for more details on the artist's life.
- 6 John Szarkowski, ed., *Walker Evans* (New York:

- Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 12.
- 7 Arnie Jarmak, email to author, July 30, 2020.
 - 8 See Andrei Codrescu, *Walker Evans: Signs* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998).
 - 9 Describing his exposure to Evans's photographs, Jarmak recalled, "I remember seeing storefronts with lettering and old hats in the window. All those signs. The hand-painted signage which was reminiscent of a bygone era. That was all apparent in Chelsea. There were a lot of images like that." Jarmak, interview.
 - 10 Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 1971): 84.
 - 11 Jarmak, interview.
 - 12 Jarmak, interview.
 - 13 Transcription of *Monopoly*'s accompanying text: "This monopoly has so much increased the number of some particular tribes of them that, like an overgrown standing army they have become formidable to the government and upon many occasions intimidate the legislature. The member of Parliament who supports every proposal for strengthening this monopoly, is sure to acquire not only the reputation of understanding trade but great popularity and influence with an order of men whose numbers and wealth render them of great importance. If he opposes them, on the contrary, and still more if he has authority enough be able to thwart them, neither the most acknowledged probity, nor the highest rank, not the greatest public services, can protect him from the most infamous abuse and detraction, from personal insults nor sometimes from real danger arising from the insolent outrage of furious and disappointed monopolists. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter II, of
 - Restraints."
 - 14 Jarmak, interview.
 - 15 The most famous example of this defense of Scott's accurate treatment of ordinary people comes from Georg Lukács in *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
 - 16 Arnie Jarmak, personal correspondence, Aug. 11, 2020.
 - 17 Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," 87.
 - 18 Katz, 87.
 - 19 Jarmak cites Smith as among those photographers whose work he encountered early on, and who provided a strong model for his own practice. Jarmak, interview.
 - 20 Most famously Susan Sontag's 1973 essay: "She seems to have enrolled in one of art photography's most visible enterprises—concentrating on victims, the unfortunate, the dispossessed—but without the compassionate purpose that such a project is expected to serve." "Freak Show," *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 15, 1973.
 - 21 See, for example, Sandra S. Phillips's catalogue essay accompanying the last major touring retrospective on Arbus: "Her refusal to patronize the people she photographed, her acceptance of this challenge of the encounter constitutes a deep and abiding humanism." In *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, ed. Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel (New York: Random House, 2003), 67.
 - 22 Jarmak, interview.
 - 23 Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," reprinted in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 303–42.
 - 24 Jarmak, interview.
 - 25 "When I get a picture that I took in the seventies but looked like it could've been in the forties, images like that really appealed to me. When I go through them now and I print images and I find one that could've come from decades earlier, it was something that I was looking for." Jarmak, interview.