

## A Familiar Lens

Project Agents: **My Camera**, Walker Evans, Antonio Castellucci Sua Moglie Maria Fanella

The agent which I have selected to identify as familiar is my camera. To understand how this agent is familiar to me, and how it is capable of interaction with the selected conditions, it is important to understand that the primary agent in my analysis of interaction within my fabric is Walker Evans. Evans' 1935 photograph, *A Graveyard and Steel Mill in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania* serves as the fabric for my three conditions of St. Michaels Cemetery, E 4<sup>th</sup> Street 1000 block housing, and the Bethlehem Steel blast furnaces, and Evan's himself subsequently serves as my primary agent of interaction. Since Evans' framing of the space within the fabric (Evans' photograph) primarily dictates our interaction with its conditions through an unfamiliar agent (Evans himself), I am citing my photography as an agent of familiarity since I am able to manipulate a spatial perception of the three conditions within the fabric (Evans' photograph) which makes it inherently personal. To achieve the effect of familiarity through inverting the photographer-viewer relationship, it of course entails that in referring to "my camera" as an agent, I am specifically referring to my photography of the three conditions within the fabric of Evans' photo.

## Congregation

My selection for a condition of congregation within Evans' photograph is St. Michael's Cemetery whose headstones make a prominent fixture in the foreground of Evans' photograph. The graveyard exhibits, as a space, the condition of congregation in both the proximity and repetition of its form. As I have attempted to illustrate in my model through the extrusion above ground of grave plots which exist beneath ground in a complex form concealed to our eyes, a cemetery is a site of unrealized form. That form, once brought before our eyes, creates a congregation of uniform smaller forms. As it relates to my photography though, that complex subterranean form is once again absent in mine and my camera's perception of the space. An alternative form, however, emerges by way of the headstones populating the site; and while they may be drastically different in form, headstones communicate congregation in their own right, using an even more complicated form. While congregation emerges before my camera in the collection of headstones it arrives in a different iteration than before. While congregation is communicated simply through the underground convergence of many uniform geometries into a hivelike structure (a form symbolic of congregation and cooperation), the idea of cohesion appears more muddled through my lens. Congregation begins to take on a different meaning by way of my

interaction with St. Michael's cemetery as it is no longer a collection of uniform parts, but rather a conglomeration, a mosaic or patchwork, of disparate forms. The headstones which favor personality and uniqueness in their design—in order to distinguish the life lived by one person from another—are intentionally unique in their form, and rather than creating an obstacle in perceiving congregation through their form, they communicate a different form of congregation. The new, unique form of congregation communicated in the headstones allows my camera to capture the complicated personality of Bethlehem through the burial place of its citizens. The varying shapes, sizes, colors, and materials of the headstones becomes symbolic of the disparate walks of life which have taken very different journeys, all from very different places, which all ultimately arriving in Bethlehem, culminating in the final destination, a permanent resting place for bodies which have covered thousands of miles in their lives, of the cemetery.

## Residence

Of the three conditions captured within Evans' photograph, I have attributed the least theoretical substance to the condition of Residence. The irony is that Residence's lack of theoretical substance lends itself to a strong theoretical explanation in the context of my project. What I mean by this is that the meaning of the role that residence plays in the fabric relies on an inherent lack of meaning; this is to say that Residence is, in its simplest form, an intermediary, or transitoinal condition—both in its placement within the fabric, and in its meaning as a condition—separating the two polarizing conditions of the blast furnaces (conflict) and the cemetery, or place of rest (congregation), and nothing much more than that. In the context of my project's fabric, I define the meaning of the E 4<sup>th</sup> street 1000 housing block as an intermediary location which separates individuals from the reality of life in the industrial, depression-era America—Evans' photography was centered on capturing this in his time with the FSA during the Great Depression—and the reality of death. In achieving this effect of mediation, moderation is key to the form of Residence as it represents the point on the gradient where the black of the steel mill and the white of the cemetery merge at a gray equilibrium. Another important formal aspect of Residence is acknowledged by way of the meaning ascribed to the building's façade. As in my drawing, the focal point of the model became the detailing of the façade in order to bring it to the forefront of our view. Accentuating the façade was done as an expression of the idea that Residence meant to its depression-era inhabitants a sense of false security. A "façade" is synonymous with a front which falsely conceals something, and the condition of Residence here represents a place of sanctuary to its residents, when really it was a transitory phase between the unavoidable realities of life and of death. In my fabric

(again, Evan's photo) and through my camera lens (agent of familiarity) Residence remains relatively unchanged. The same houses exist without any alteration of their structure; however, a noticeable change in their appearance is noticeable, all of which is contained in the façade. To my camera, pleasant continuity of the houses and the admirable quality of their solid brick construction is disrupted by the addition of new mismatched facades reflective of cheaper, modern building practice. Detail is lost in the brick corbeling along the façade cornice, and dentils are smoothed over with some form of newer factory engineered surface. The facades these days illustrate the same purpose as in my fabric set in the past, yet they do so through a different form. Today, the once uniform facades have gained the added quality of agedness and wear as we see in the mismatched hodgepodge of the work likely done to repair the façade at minimal cost, as well as reflect the evolution of taste as we see them juxtaposed with those facades which retain their original form.

## Conflict

Remarkably, with a cemetery to contend with, Conflict stakes its claim within the fabric as the grimmest of the three conditions. Since the beginning of formulating a theory for fabric, the blast furnaces, or stacks, asserted themselves as a foreboding presence in Evan's photograph. To me, the attitude of Evans' photo called alarm to their silent malice in the distance, and I felt they belonged as the arbiter of conflict in the scenario. Formally, the blast furnaces scream danger in their dark metal constitution, intimidating height, and their suggestion of heat and explosion, likening themselves to industrial volcanos. In his framing of the shot, Evans gives the stacks precedence by highlighting the massiveness of their size while they are still so far away, and clutters the background with them, cutting off their form at either side to imply further continuation of their massiveness. To my camera, the stacks loom larger than life. While on the premises of the formerly Bethlehem Steel, capturing them in a single photo is all but impossible. In my drawings of the facility, I wanted to emphasize the parts most necessary to the firing of iron to highlight their involvement in the conflict. In the case of Evans' photo, the conflict of the Steel Stacks represented the reality of life in a depression-era steel-town. This reality was one of Sisyphean toil, and a seemingly endless struggle to make ends meet. It is hard to know exactly how dire the situation was for the men and women who lived in the buildings of the 1000 block on E 4<sup>th</sup> street, worked in the Steel Stacks, and who were ultimately interred at St. Michael's, but for the immigrants seeking a better life, whether they achieved it or not, it was undeniably one characterized by immense work. I dwell on this challenge to illustrate the point I attempt to make in my project that for these men and women, life was work (Steel Stacks) and death was rest (St. Michael's Cemetery). To my

camera, the Furnaces' determination to withstand the passage of time is a testament to the hard work, industry, and resilience of the men who built it. These days my camera shows me that it is as lifeless as the men of St. Michael's cemetery who spent their adult lives toiling away inside it. Formally, a quality of conflict is still captured, though—as in the case of the previous two examples—it is one which has evolved from its prior manifestation. Through my eyes and through the lens of my camera, the conflict I perceive still derives from its intimidating form, only now it does so not in a threatening way, but a tragic one. The rust and dilapidation of the facility—it is clear we are looking at the same, though radically altered structure—emanates a conflict with its environment. Its gargantuan form stands as a monument of obsolescence, but also as a tribute to the lives of men who built it, stubbornly refusing to be buried, making sure it will continue to stand long after the men who built it cannot.