

THE ARCHIVE 28

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HARRY CALLAHAN
EARLY STREET PHOTOGRAPHY
1943–1945

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The Center for Creative Photography is a research museum devoted to twentieth-century photography. Among its extensive collections are complete archives of photographers who have made significant and creative contributions to the field. Each issue of *The Archive* is drawn from the Center's extensive collections of photographs, manuscripts, and negatives.

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Director's Statement

by TERENCE PITTS

AS THE CARETAKERS OF A UNIQUE RESOURCE, we have the pleasure of serving historians, biographers, curators, and scholars from a variety of disciplines and from every aesthetic and theoretical persuasion. One of the rewards we receive for preserving and making accessible photographers' archives is seeing how students and scholars use the materials they find as they make their way through what David Jacobs, in *The Archive* 23, called the "labyrinth" of researching in archives.

This issue of *The Archive* resulted from conversations between the Center's staff and John Pultz as he was researching in the Harry Callahan Archive in preparation for his doctoral dissertation on Callahan. We stopped him in the middle of his own personal labyrinth and asked him to share some of the discoveries he was making. That's when he told us about the "tilted heads."

Nearly fifteen years ago, when the first parts of the Harry Callahan Archive began arriving at the Center, Callahan sent along some of his very early work on loan. We processed the loan and stored it, and probably no one ever asked to see these photographs until John Pultz did. Pultz was fascinated with a series of photographs of women's heads, made on the streets of Detroit with a handheld camera in the early forties. Callahan had mounted some of them at whatever angle was necessary to restore the horizon line to a position parallel to the top and bottom of the mountboard.

Pultz's fascination with this early series was contagious, and an issue of *The Archive* was proposed. Callahan agreed and graciously made the photographs a gift to the Center. And so it is fitting that we dedicate this issue to Harry Callahan, who has devoted a half century of his life to photography and who has made an indelible, yet sensitive, mark on the medium.



[self-portrait], 1942
Harry Callahan Archive

Harry Callahan

Early Street Photography, 1943-1945

by JOHN PULTZ

PHOTOGRAPHS THAT HARRY CALLAHAN MADE on the streets of Detroit between 1943 and 1945 reveal an unexpected richness in the photographer's working method and path to maturation.* Studied in a chronological context, the photographs disclose a complex development that thematic studies of his work have ignored. While photographs he made before 1943 and after 1945 display a distinctive formal cleanliness, these have a gritty snapshot quality associated with street photography of the sixties. With these pictures, Callahan moved beyond the influences of camera club pictorialism and Ansel Adams's purism to establish an experimentally based personal vision. In addition, with them, Callahan first explored a motif that occupied him throughout his career, that of women shoppers on the street.

These pictures are products of what Callahan had seen and heard, accepted and rejected during his first years as a photographer. Joe Munroe, a photographer who was among Callahan's Detroit friends, recently described Callahan's iconoclastic approach: "Callahan was always trying to push things around. Whatever he saw he didn't like. He wanted to do what *he* wanted to do."¹ Because he refused to imitate what he saw in the work of others, Callahan's pictures are indelibly his own, anomalies among American photographs made during the second World War. Neither seemingly accurate reports from a photojournalist nor precious objects made by a pictorialist photographer,

they comprise a clearly personal view of external reality, quickly seen with no respect for conventional composition. Enlarged from 35mm negatives, these photographs are printed small to be sharp. Yet in defiance of normative tonal rendering, they use extreme tones of black and white. To best understand these early street pictures, we start with Callahan's origins as a photographer.

• • •

Harry Callahan's beginnings as a photographer were those of an amateur, not a modern professional artist. Working as a clerk for the Detroit auto maker Chrysler, Callahan bought a twin-lens Rolleicord camera in 1938. Like thousands of his fellow Americans, he thought photography would make a good hobby.² And like many of them, he decided to join a camera club to learn the "how to's" of this new craft.³ At the Chrysler Camera Club and then the Photographic Guild of Detroit, Callahan acquired the basics of photography, but was frustrated when he sought out serious photographers interested in making what he considered good pictures. With the exception of a few other young men with ambitions similar to Callahan's,⁴ most of the people Callahan encountered at the clubs were there for social reasons. Aesthetically, they were adherents of pictorialism, a conservative movement among photographers that relied on rules and competitions to define an *art* of photography that was clearly distinguished from the medium's record-making functions.

Callahan found an alternative to pictorialism three years later. In August/September 1941, he attended a two-weekend workshop that the Photographic Guild sponsored with the California photographer Ansel

*Much of the information in this essay comes from a series of interviews the author conducted with Harry Callahan between March 1989 and April 1990, in Atlanta, Georgia; Providence, Rhode Island; and New York City; and by telephone.

Adams. Instruction at the workshop, a blend of demonstration and talk, was part of the campaign Adams had begun as a member of the reform group *f/64*. In opposition to the pictorial results that camera club photographers sought to obtain by optical, chemical, and manual means, Adams advocated the creation of straight, unmanipulated photographs, made physically beautiful and referentially exact by absolute perfection of technique. The technical perfection Adams demanded in finished prints was dependent on their relative size. As a photographic negative is enlarged, its grain pattern becomes more pronounced. Pictorialist photographers accepted, even desired this transformation; the grain became a screen that supplanted the texture of photographed objects and unified the photograph. But Adams, eschewing such deviation from the truthful rendering of textures and tones of the visual world, made modest sized prints, with little or no enlarging. In comparison to the mammoth 14x17- or 16x20-inch prints that dominated photographic salons of the early forties, the prints Adams showed Detroit workshop members were mostly 8x10s or smaller.⁵ In emulation of Adams, Callahan stopped making large prints of his 2¼-inch square Rolleicord and 9x12cm Linhof negatives, and contact printed them instead.⁶

The workshop was a momentous event for Callahan; the change to small contact prints was only its most obvious effect. Adams presented Callahan with new and unexpected possibilities. He introduced Callahan to a world of culture far beyond the one he had shared with his family or camera club buddies and left him transformed; for the first time in his life, Callahan listened to classical music and looked at art in museums.

The personal transformation that Callahan experienced at the workshop was not incidental to the subsequent change in his photography. What Adams offered him was a conception of photography that differed radically from pictorialism's; rather than a convention-based craft, the medium could be a personally expressive art. But to practice it as such, or so Adams's argument would have run, Callahan must first learn to trust himself, rather than rules and juries, as the arbiter of quality. Camera club photography relied on formal compositional devices easily taught to great numbers of people. Fired by Adams, Callahan rejected this aesthetic for one based on a spontaneous, personal experience of nature, a Whitmanesque stance close to Adams's position before the war. In 1941,

Adams wrote: "The whole world is, to me, very much 'alive' — all the little growing things, even the rocks. I can't look at a swell bit of grass and earth, for instance, without feeling the essential life—the things going on—within them. The same goes for a mountain, or a bit of the ocean, or a magnificent piece of old wood."⁷ Sharing with Adams this respect for the ordinary in nature, Callahan began making photographs of subjects that were on the fringe of everyday experience, far from the stuff of grand pictorial art. These pictures show very simple places around Detroit.⁸ In one of them, long grasses in lightly rippled water combine with their reflections to create a quiet



Detroit, 1941–43
24.1 x 33.1cm
76:031:008



Detroit, 1941–43
8.3 x 11.5cm
77:070:009

image that is suggestive of oriental calligraphy. A second picture depicts a scene perhaps even more ordinary, limited to a weedy marsh in the foreground and several rows of telephone poles along the horizon, possibly trailing a highway or railroad line.

But just as Callahan had rejected the ideas of pictorialism, he was not content to follow Adams slavishly. In 1943, Callahan began work that challenged what he had learned from Adams about fidelity to tone and texture: "... I was photographing weeds in snow. I looked through the camera and I just saw the lines. That was a really exciting and beautiful thing to me."⁹ In the photographs that resulted, such as *Grass in Snow*,



Grass in Snow, 1943
9.2 x 11.1cm
76:307:002



Sunlight on Water, 1943
7.9 x 11.0cm
79:029:010

in Snow, weeds form an abstract pattern against snow, which appears as an undifferentiated field of white photographic paper. A similarly intuitive sense of personal discovery, leading to similar formal results, governs Callahan's exploration of the patterns made by light reflecting on moving water. "I was photographing water until it was coming out of my ears. While looking at the ground glass, all of a sudden I saw the lines, and I left the shutter open for 1/2 second or a second instead of a fast speed."¹⁰ In a reversal of the light-dark relationships of *Grass in Snow*, dematerialized highlights in *Sunlight on Water* play against a featureless black ground, producing an even more abstract picture.

These two pictures were made in direct contradiction to the technical advice Adams had given at the workshop, as Callahan has explained: "Somebody might say, how do you get good snow texture and Adams would say, you use a G filter, or something like that. But the point was he was concerned with some kind of reality, so it looked like snow. He wanted everything to look like it looked to your eyes. So it was a real adventure to me to distort it."¹¹ According to Callahan, when Adams saw *Grass in Snow* for the first time, he thought it was an abstraction and said to Callahan, "Why don't you do something real?" After fellow photographer Arthur Siegel explained to Adams that this *was* something real, Adams asked Callahan to sell him a print of the picture.¹²

When Callahan published these pictures in 1946, he accompanied them with a short statement. In it he argues that technical experimentation in photography can be personally expressive.¹³ Photographs that said something in a "new manner" excited him, not just because they were different. Anything *new* documents individual self-expression. Conversely, conventional photography held no interest for him because it represented conventional thinking, which "has become dull to those who wish to think for themselves." Callahan continued, arguing that *Grass in Snow* and *Sunlight on Water* express through their technical innovations "feeling more than anything else": the snow pictures are "a standard photographic problem" handled in a new way, while the light reflection series are "an experiment, not new probably, but new to me which was the exciting part of it."

At the same time that Callahan was turning from Adams's demand that photographs render the complete tonal range of seen reality to a conviction in the expressive power of abstraction and other technical

novelties, he was also losing interest in view cameras: "I had gotten sick and tired of looking at the ground glass and wanted to work with a hand held camera. I felt I needed the change."¹⁴ As a result, he took his 9x12 Linhof off its tripod and, using its built-in range finder, worked with it briefly as a hand-held camera. Then he bought a 35mm Contax single lens reflex camera, probably in 1943.¹⁵ Among the first pictures Callahan made with it were abstractions of light movements as well as the photographs that are the subject of this essay, candid shots of people, mostly women, on the streets of Detroit's shopping district. Both the light abstractions and the street pictures continued themes that Callahan had begun with the 9x12 camera, but in each case Callahan changed his approach in response to the unique qualities the 35mm camera. Street work with the 9x12 included a series of multiple-exposure photographs that depended on the use of the tripod to replicate near-identical shots.¹⁶ Working with the Contax, however, Callahan increasingly exploited the freedom it offered to ignore conventional orientation.



Detroit, 1943
22.3 x 30.6cm
79:029:005

Callahan quit his job at Chrysler when he was called up for military service, but his draft board rejected him because of an ulcer he had had when he was younger. By January 1944, he was making contact prints in the photographic labs of General Motors, where defense-related production demanded he work

a five-and-a-half-day week. Ross Haarz, who shared a darkroom at GM with Callahan between January and the summer of 1944, remembers that during that time Callahan talked intensely about pictures he was making of heads in crowds.¹⁷ According to Haarz, he would accompany Callahan to downtown Detroit on Saturday afternoons because it was on his way home from work. The two would go to a busy part of the shopping district. One spot Haarz remembers is Woodward Avenue, across from the J. L. Hudson Company department store. There Callahan would stand up against a building and shoot faces in the crowd. Callahan used his 35mm Contax camera; the lens, Haarz thinks, was an 85mm, or maybe longer: "He was using the long lens to isolate the faces."

In order to make sharp negatives despite the fact that the subjects and sometimes Callahan himself were moving, Callahan processed his Kodak Super-XX film for gamma infinity. This technique, which Callahan had learned from Adams, called for exposing film as if it were more sensitive than its rated speed and then developing it for an extended time to compensate. For this series, it allowed Callahan to use a fast shutter speed (1/1250 of a second) and a relatively small aperture (*f*/8 or *f*/5.6) to produce sharp negatives. The fast shutter stopped the action; the small aperture produced a depth of field great enough to make precise focusing on moving subjects unnecessary, while it used the center of the lens where it would be sharpest. The technique also affected the tones of the prints. Negatives that are underexposed and overdeveloped, as Callahan exposed and processed these, are less dense and have greater contrast than normal. The resulting prints have less detail, especially in the areas of shadows, and fewer middle tones.

Callahan printed his 35mm negatives on Azo paper, a Kodak product he knew from making contact prints from his 9x12cm and 8x10-inch negatives. Although Azo paper is not intended for enlargements, Callahan had become accustomed to its finely graded tones and "just couldn't give [it] up."¹⁸ Azo is a slow paper, requiring more light during exposure than papers intended for enlarging, and more light than most enlargers can provide. To solve this problem, Callahan borrowed from Arthur Siegel a Leitz Focomat enlarger, which accepted a photoflood light, an abnormally bright light source for an enlarger.

Callahan printed his 35mm negatives small. The first ones he made were approximately 3x4½ inches,

just a little smaller than the *contact* prints he made from his 9x12cm negatives; later ones were even a little smaller. That Callahan enlarged these negatives so little — 35mm negatives are commonly blown up to fill 5x7-inch or 8x10-inch sheets of photographic paper — suggests that he was still thinking not only of the size but also of the print quality of his 9x12cm contact prints. While Callahan could view his work beginning in 1943 as a break with Adams's notions of appropriate print quality and negative size, he still could not bring himself to print the 35mm negatives so large that the film's grain would displace the photographed objects in defining the prints's texture and tone. Callahan mounted the first prints he made from the Contax, the larger ones, on silver-toned boards. He chose silver, he says, thinking it would be good to match the board with the silver tones of the prints.¹⁹ When he mounted the smaller prints, he abandoned this idea and switched to a neutral white board.

• • •

The first group of prints Callahan made and mounted — the larger ones on silver boards — includes three types of subject matter. Two of these pictures show people moving through public spaces: in one of them walking past a vaguely defined building, in the other boarding a bus. Two other photographs show brightly lit single figures walking past a shadowy expanse. The remaining pictures in this first group show female shoppers passing a hat store window.

Despite differences in scale and relative complexity, these photographs are structured similarly. Each image has a stage-like space sandwiched between the picture surface and an architectonic element behind it, within which figures exist as if intentionally positioned or even choreographed.²⁰ This narrow band of space is similar to the pictorial space constructed in classical sarcophagi and friezes, and reinterpreted in the paintings of Jacques-Louis David and other French Neoclassic artists of the 1780s and 90s. As used by Callahan, this stage-like space enhances the stability of the figures within it, refusing them the option of any casual movement or accidental position. It permits instead only profiles, back views, and three-quarter views.

Structures within some of these pictures further stabilize the human bodies. Callahan uses the building, in Plate 2, and the bus and foreground railing, in

Plate 1, to create grids that secure the figures; it seems not to be Callahan's camera that has frozen them. With the attitudes of the figures limited, attention shifts to more subtle areas, ones that might otherwise go unnoticed: Plate 1, like a Muybridge motion study (especially *Eakin's Hand* from *Animal Locomotion*, 1887), isolates for analysis in each lateral quarter the possible, and seemingly sequential, positions of the human right forearm. Callahan presents at once the contingent and the universal; Plate 2 becomes a study of women's legs walking. The framing and the careful positioning of bodies, coupled with theatrical side lighting, classicize the figures. With photography's claim to truth, we are convinced that we see specific individuals; yet, the classicizing overlay, consciously intended or not, suggests as well that these are ideal types, existing in a mythical realm.

The pedestrians dressed in white caught in the bright sun of Plates 3 and 4 exist within perhaps the most shallow of these stage-set spaces, so shallow that the woman on the left in Plate 4, who must be only inches deeper into the scene than is the man, is obscured in the shadows, with only her white shoes catching the light. Unlike the forms in the previous pair of photographs, the element that delimits this narrow space is not architectural, nor even real, but is the virtual creation of Callahan's processing for gamma infinity, which suppresses detail. Only the vaguest description of form remains within the shadowed void; it appears in the photographs to have a solidity that in reality it may or may not have. These photographs, although partially suggestive of the blinding light of a summer day, go beyond visual experience to one that is photographic. The contrast of tones that Callahan establishes here is not a property of our retinas but of the curve that describes the variables in exposing and processing photographic film; to create a new vision, devoid of commonplace seeing, Callahan has used technology. But it is not only the deviation from retinal vision that emphasizes that these pictures are technological in origin and not natural. It is also their formal content. The exact repetition of motif from image to image, with only the seemingly chance change of passing figures, testifies to the mechanical origins of the images. These two pictures refer to no pre-photographic pictures, but instead to surveillance, and other photographs made for the collection of data. Seen in this way, these pictures are modern, novel, even scientific, and thus, for Callahan, expressive.

*HARRY CALLAHAN
EARLY WORK*

A PORTFOLIO

All the photographs reproduced in this portfolio section are gelatin silver prints made in Detroit between 1943 and 1945. The reproductions are the same size and are oriented to the page at the same angle as those in the Harry Callahan Archive at the Center for Creative Photography.



Plate 1 76:031:144



Plate 2 76:031:143



Plate 3 76:031:145



Plate 4 76:031:146



Plate 5 76:031:140



Plate 6 76:031:142



Plate 7 76:031:138









Plate 11 76:031:125







Plate 14 76:031:112



Plate 15 76:031:109





Plate 17 76:031:153















In the photographs of women shoppers in front of a store window, Callahan explores a theme that occupied the French photographer Eugène Atget as early as 1912 and again from 1925 through 1927, and was picked up thereafter by French surrealist photographers, most notably Henri Cartier-Bresson.²¹ But if Callahan's decision to photograph shoppers in front of mannequins inside this store window had any source beyond his own intuitive observation, it was less likely to be Atget's photographs, which Callahan remembers seeing for the first time only late in 1945 on a visit to Berenice Abbott's New York City studio,²² than articles and pictures in amateur photography magazines. For example, one of these magazines, *Minicam: The Miniature Camera Monthly*, reproduced between 1938 and 1941 several photographs of milliners' windows filled with hat mannequins. In one of these pictures, the window reflects a park opposite it, superimposing the reflection of trees over a mannequin's face. The text analyzes the effect achieved: "Reflections — the bane of commercial store-window photographers — are welcomed by the amateur pictorialist when interesting compositions result. . . . [T]he window panes distorted the distant park view just enough to give a surrealist effect to the hat mannikin."²³ That a "surrealist effect" can be described without reference to Atget, Cartier-Bresson, or any other serious photographer suggests the difficulty of tracing the diffusion of influences among photographers of this period. It is possible that Callahan and his circle of photographers came to know about modernism from the books by European avant-garde photographers they saw at the home of Arthur Siegel. But it is just as likely that they absorbed the formal aspects of surrealism, constructivism, and other modernist styles from camera magazines, albeit stripped of their high art pedigrees.

In Callahan's photographs of the store window, a stage-like spatial arrangement appears again. Figures are set in a narrow band layered between the picture plane and the storefront behind it, but here the foreground has been eliminated to heighten the flatness of the space. Callahan compresses the space still further by technical means. The prints lack the gray middle tones that would contribute to a description of roundness, depth, and continuity among forms; the pictorial space is fractured and becomes jumbled areas of white and black that almost collapse into a single plane. Callahan repeats here the willingness that he exhibited in the 1943 photographs *Grass in Snow* and

Sunlight on Water to forgo tonal fidelity in order to achieve expressive ends. Like Atget and the surrealists, Callahan plays with the continuity between real and display space by rhyming and echoing shoppers with mannequins. In Plate 5, the hatted head of a shopper, seen in strict profile and rendered in contrasting blacks and whites, matches the angle and tones of the mannequin seen at her back to approach being indistinguishable from the contents of the window. In Plate 6 the blonde shopper echoes the faces and simulated hair of the two mannequins that appear to look up at her. In Plate 7 the shopper's real hand seems to reach into the space of the window, about to touch the false hand of the mannequin.

In the earlier group of photographs that were mounted on silver paper Callahan used a strategy to create coherent pictorial space that was to remain with him throughout his career. He would photograph a wall or building facade head on, from a vantage point that filled the frame with form, corner to corner, and created a shallow, flat space. Avoiding an uneven junction of sky and earth or an unwanted figure/ground relationship, Callahan created in this way pictures with strong and easily graspable forms. Callahan may have chosen this strategy for arranging the pictorial space in so many of his pictures because it obviates the use of a more complex space-arranging formula. One could, for example, translate real space into pictorial space by arranging receding masses in the picture as planes along one or more sweeping S-curves, as Callahan could have learned to do at camera clubs. But Callahan had no interest in using this compositional device because it represented all that he disliked about the camera clubs, especially their practice of dissecting pictures, diagramming pat formulas onto them to explain (or for Callahan, explain away) their success. The kind of head-on treatment of form Callahan developed in the early forties made the hated S-curve unnecessary. With no far distances to mediate into the flat plane of the picture, there would be no need for the sweeping curves, or even dramatic diagonals, that were part of the camera club pictorial vocabulary.

. . .

The second group of mounted prints — the smaller ones on white board — are the products of a single sustained effort to record the heads of women on the street.²⁴ These photographs show women, singly and

in pairs, walking on the streets of downtown Detroit. Although it is wintertime in these pictures — hats and scarves, wool coats and fur collars figure prominently in them — their subject is not the weather but something more subtle and less journalistic: individual countenances. Faces appear against vague backgrounds of out-of-focus middle tones or undifferentiated black voids. Other details are dim or obscure. Positioned out of the flow of pedestrian traffic, Callahan had photographed the women as they walked towards him, recording them in three-quarters view or, as they came even with his position, in profile.

Callahan distills into these pictures formal and iconic possibilities explored in the earlier group of photographs. From the photographs of brightly lit figures in front a shadowy background (Plates 3 and 4), he again adopted the use of high contrast to isolate white heads against dark grounds. And from the photographs of shoppers in front of the store window (Plates 5, 6, and 7), he explored an interest in studying women that has remained with him throughout his career.

Callahan's comments give some idea of his intent in making these pictures and the process by which they evolved. Of the beginnings of the street pictures Callahan wrote: "I had an urge to photograph people on streets in downtown Detroit, and to do it freely."²⁵ Callahan has elaborated on his work in this series: "I guess the only thing I could think of was simple human relationships. The [women] might put their arms around each other, doing something with their hands, the arms, with relation to each other. But [the photographs] were never very strong. Then I felt that somehow or the other the idea I wanted was 'lost in thought.' I guess the thing is, I don't like pictures showing great emotion — people sobbing, deep in thought, and all that kind of stuff. So I wanted them when they weren't doing any of that stuff. I wanted them lost in their own thoughts as they walked down the street."²⁶

The order in which Callahan made these pictures is not known, but his comments suggest that one might look for a progression from action, such as speaking or listening, to contemplation. Callahan says he started off making photographs that showed women "doing something... with relation to each other,"²⁷ but became dissatisfied with this: "First I shot the recognizable action, people talking to each other, laughing together, etc. This had a literal value which has never been satisfying to me. While shoot-

ing this way I found that people walking were lost in thought and this is what I wanted."²⁸ First might come a picture, such as Plate 8, which shows a pair of women together, talking or laughing simultaneously. Then the roles of speaker and listener begin to be differentiated; although the two figures in Plates 9 and 10 are given equal importance, it is clear who speaks and who listens. In Plates 11 and 12 a further shift appears. Speaker and listener no longer receive equal emphasis. Shown smaller and out of focus, the speaker diminishes in importance, while the listener dominates the center of the frame. By isolating the listener, Callahan found a way to represent thought rather than action. This means of representing contemplation, through the depiction of listening, was not unique to Callahan. Esther Bublely, like Callahan, photographed wartime American women lost in their own thoughts, in the midst of what one writer has called "the drift of reverie."²⁹ Closest to these pictures by Callahan is one Bublely made in Washington, D.C., in 1943. It bears the caption *Listening to a Murder Mystery in a Boarding House Room* yet shows no source of sound, concentrating instead on the listener's inward response.



Esther Bublely
*Listening to a Murder Mystery
 on the Radio in a Boarding
 House Room, Washington, D.C.,
 1943*
 Farm Security Administration photograph

Depicting ever more interior states, Callahan may have subsequently photographed women alone rather than in pairs. Within these pictures, there would seem to be a further progression that is psychological, if not chronological. Some of these pictures show women who are connected with their surroundings, reacting to some external stimulus (Plates 13 and 17) or communicating through their expressions some internal emotion (Plates 14 and 15). Other examples show women with down-cast gazes (Plates 18 and 23) or shadow-obscured eyes (Plates 16 and 20), but these devices cut the figures off from the viewer, connoting separation rather than inwardness. Only in a few of these photographs does Callahan succeed in the task he had given himself, to show women lost in thought. In Plates 21 and 22, eyes are averted in a pose of inwardness, but the individuals remain intensely present. In Plates 19 and 24, eyes are open but the women, while alert, neither respond to nor communicate with their environment.

Callahan has considered these pictures unsuccessful. In discussions he describes how he has repeatedly pursued certain themes throughout his career, returning to them time and again, until he got them right. “[I]n Detroit . . . I photographed people’s heads and faces with a 35mm. And they weren’t real strong, but that’s when it started. Then I got real good ones, for me, around 1950. . . . It’s the way I’ve always worked. I do something and it doesn’t come out too good, then I get fed up and I finish it. And then I realize later that it’s something I still want to do.”³⁰ But in comparison with the pictures of women shoppers he made later, some of these earlier ones just as successfully represent women “lost in thought.”

When Callahan returned in 1950 to the motif of women on the street, he worked again with a 35mm camera, but this time used a longer lens so that the heads filled most of the frame, with little area left to describe. As in the works made between 1943 and 1945, these Chicago heads are isolated from their environment. In contradistinction to Callahan’s stated goal of showing women lost in thought, though, many of these 1950 pictures have an implied narrative of a cinema still, not unlike earlier works like Plate 17. Possessing, too, the gritty quality of film noir, they suggest some great evil existing outside the frame, represented within it only by the emotions expressed on the figure’s face. In a few of these 1950 photographs, however, Callahan does seem to have achieved his goal, to present faces “lost in thought,” without



Chicago, 1950
20.0 x 29.8cm
76:031:096



Chicago, 1950
20.1 x 30.4cm
76:031:097



Chicago, 1950
20.2 x 29.8cm
76:031:099

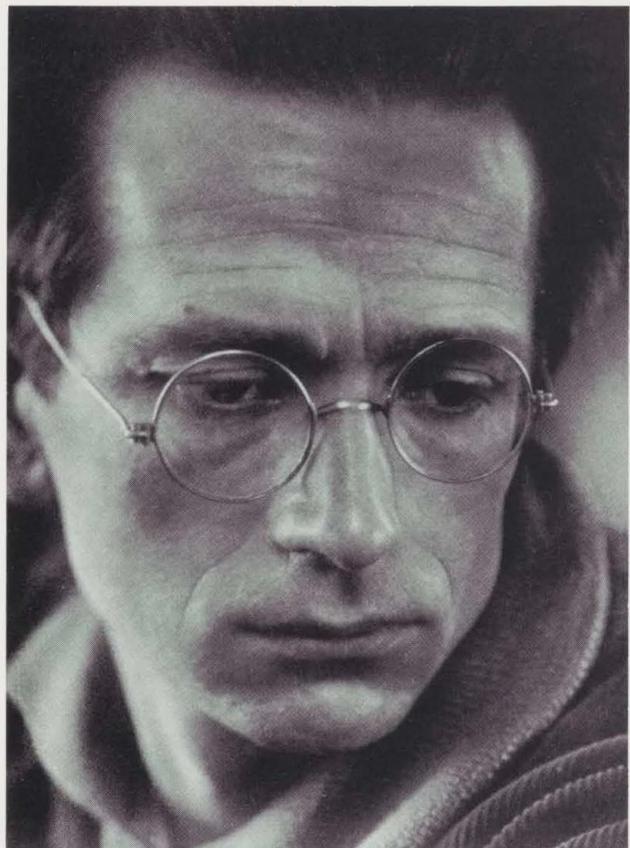
great emotion. The figures shown share these qualities with some of the photographs from the early forties, such as Plates 19 and 24.

Callahan turned a third time to women on the street, in a series of photographs he made in Chicago in 1961. A low vantage point, heavy printing, and expressive faces combine to create images of towering heroic figures. Like some of the pictures from both earlier efforts, these seem to be excerpts from larger wholes, and as such, imply narratives moving through them that negate the possibility of reading the figures simply as being lost in thought. High midday sun and contrasty printing void these women's eyes; this absence functions here as it does in figural sculpture, supporting the transformation of a specific individual to a formidable type.

When Callahan made the pictures of women shoppers on Detroit streets he had seen close-up shots of heads by two photographers: the German-born artist Helmar Lerski and an amateur at the Photographic Guild of Detroit. Callahan had seen Lerski's 1931 book *Köpfe des Alltags* (Everyday Heads) at Arthur Siegel's house, probably in late 1942 or 1943. It contained frame-filling facial portraits of anonymous workers organized by occupation. The book's similarity in content and structure to August Sander's 1929 volume *Anlitz der Zeit* (Face of the Epoch) suggests that Lerski might have a place among the avant-garde. But Lerski's photographs are more pictorial than modern; their impact comes from theatrical rather than purely photographic means. Lerski applied petroleum jelly to his subjects' faces to make pores and



Chicago, 1961
16.0 x 24.1cm
79:049:002



Helmar Lerski
Revolutionärer Arbeiter
from *Köpfe des Alltags*, 1931

wrinkles stand out under strong side-lighting. This enhanced the skin texture and gave the print surface a tactile, all-over decorative pattern, similar to the effects achieved by pictorialists from the use of printing screens. The other photographs of heads that Callahan saw were by a nameless amateur. Callahan remembers this man's pictures as "close ups that were a couple of people's heads."³¹ Callahan continues: "He blew them up like this [indicates large prints, maybe twenty inches square]. They were with a small camera and you could see every pore and everything. For some reason that really impressed me." While these models may have affected Callahan's choice to photograph heads close up, they did not determine the treatment he gave to them. Detailed rendering of skin, especially pores, is a notable attribute of both Lerski's and the anonymous photographer's portraits, but in Callahan's photographs of Detroit women, skin texture is basically obliterated through the high contrast processing of negatives and paper.

Callahan wanted to avoid emotion in the Detroit heads: "I don't really care about human emotion. I don't like the pictures of some tragedy, great joy and all that stuff."³² Behind this stance are several possible explanations. Like his use of flat space to avoid the "loathed" S-curve, Callahan's desire to produce emotionally neutral photographs may well have come out of his antipathy for the teachings of camera clubs, which heaped high praise onto emotional, sentimental pictures. Callahan tells of the time that Siegel, as a sendup of the work of conventional club photographers, brought to a meeting of the Photographic Guild clichéd baby pictures and was highly celebrated for them.³³ And throughout camera magazines, amateurs were urged to make pictures that showed emotion: "For the photographers who can present ideas, emotions and slogans photographically, there is a limitless field of adventure and profit."³⁴ Many amateurs believed that emotion was one of the keys to "Art"; if only they could show emotion in their photographs, their activity would be on this higher plane: "Beauty, love, religion, desire, hate, ambition, lust — these things are put into form by art, and its spokesmen are poets and painters, novelists and musicians. . . . The photographer, too, has emotions to express and a medium to do it."³⁵

In addition to being promoted by camera clubs, expression of emotion was central to photojournalism. While we may, from the perspective of the nineties, label Callahan's work "personally expressive" to

underscore that it had a unique artistic personality behind it, at the time it was made Callahan was seen as producing images in which personal expression as such was absent. In comparison to the heavy expressiveness of not only camera club pictorialists but also photojournalists, such as W. Eugene Smith, Callahan's work *was* reticent.³⁶ Following a psychological reading of the interrelationship between life and work, this hesitancy to express extreme emotional states may well derive from Callahan's personal reticence as well as his parents' lack of sociability that he had observed while growing up.

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There are two further aspects to consider about Callahan's early street photographs. One is Callahan's use of the tilted frame. The other is his presentation of them in series.

In some of these pictures, Callahan tilted the camera as he made the exposure. The prints that result have the skewed horizontal and vertical elements that would later characterize Garry Winogrand's street photographs of the sixties and seventies. But unlike Winogrand, who left the oblique horizon in many of his photographs as a sign of their spontaneous and technological origin, Callahan could not allow this messiness into the finished work. When he mounted the prints, he reestablished the proper orientation, positioning them at an angle to align the vertical and horizontal elements with the edges of the board.

The tilting of the camera at the time of making these negatives was neither spontaneous nor accidental. Consistent with Callahan's working method, it occurred with some persistence in his 35mm work of this time as he explored in isolation one out of the countless variables that go into making a picture. Among Callahan's negatives from the early forties are whole rolls with the frame turned off axis. Notable examples among these are negatives in which Callahan, photographing pedestrians in downtown Detroit and suburban Highland Park, angled the camera to place solitary standing figures on the diagonal of the frame.³⁷ That Callahan kept the camera tilted frame after frame suggests that he did so programmatically rather than in response to specific circumstances or in haste. During this same period Callahan shot with the Contax looking down from above, from his third or fourth floor apartment in Highland Park and from a highway overpass, seemingly quite conscious of the



negatives of downtown Detroit, ca. 1943–45
Harry Callahan Archive

change in gravity and order that results when any sense of normal orientation for the camera is destroyed.³⁸

It is tempting to find for this manipulation of camera angle an influence that derives directly and exclusively from high art, such as the Bauhaus aesthetics of the artist László Moholy-Nagy. Siegel had studied with Moholy in Chicago at the New Bauhaus and introduced Callahan and others in Detroit to Moholy's New Vision. But Siegel was using unusual angles in his photography before going to Chicago. As with Callahan's interest in store windows, there are vernacular sources for his and Siegel's use of angle shots. In the late thirties and early forties, bird's-eye, worm's-eye, and other unusual views appeared throughout photography magazines, as well as general interest picture weeklies. *Minicam*, which by 1943 was trying to balance pictorialism with a more modern journalistic realism, ran several articles explaining how angle shots could convey photographers' meaning.³⁹ Moholy-Nagy and the Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko had originally used angle shots to decontextualize and defamiliarize the ordinary to bespeak a new, utopian organization of society. But in the context of American photography, the angle shot was stripped of its original radical significance. Among pictorialists it became aestheticized, depoliticized, and even conventionalized in lists of dos and don'ts. Self-conscious camera angles no longer suggested a radical disengagement with conventionality but became a way for pictorialists to mark their work as individualistic, a usage that suggests a failure of imagination on the part of pictorialists to believe in the more subtle potential of photography to be personally expressive.

That Callahan mounted these angled prints askew to regain their proper relationship to the natural horizon suggests that he, too, was willing to go only so far. To our eyes, accustomed to the regularized grid of the museum wall and the printed page, these tilted prints may suggest a radical disregard for the rules of proper presentation. But seen within the context of their own time, they suggest instead a retreat to convention, away from the radical possibilities of tilted horizons. One finds in photography periodicals many instances of skewed photographs, both in the magazines' own layouts and in illustrations that accompanied articles, that could have led Callahan to do the same. One of these articles, for example, suggested ways to arrange pictures in portrait albums so that eyes and actions hold the pages together.⁴⁰ Another explained through text and example how mounting

photographic prints off center would give added emphasis to diagonal vectors, tonal weight, and other formal properties.⁴¹

Callahan's photographs from the early forties discussed here possess as groups qualities beyond those of any one. As such, they share in aspects of repetition and seriality that have been linked to photography throughout its history. These qualities are especially closely connected to 35mm photography, in part because of the sheer ease of creating multiple, differing originals with it. The seriality of 35mm photography seems almost cinematic, a perception that is historically and technologically rooted: the 35mm still camera was invented *after* the motion picture camera to use leftover motion picture film.⁴² Unlike sheet film cameras, which require the photographer to make several hand movements between exposures, 35mm cameras allow photographers to make picture after picture with hardly a pause.

There is a difference in photography between a group of unedited proofs and a true series. In the first case, the photographer has made countless variants prior to the selection of the final image or images. In the second case, the photographer intends, either in making or exhibiting the pictures, that they should be seen as a coherent group. Callahan's early street photographs are of the second type, evidenced by Callahan's decision to mount the prints on board and his statements that he was consciously thinking in terms of series.

Callahan has said that his use of series came from Adams,⁴³ whose *Surf Sequence* Callahan had seen in Detroit in 1941, and Stieglitz,⁴⁴ whom he had visited in New York during the summers of 1942 and 1943. In their work, Adams and Stieglitz suggest two different notions of seriality. Adams's *Surf Sequence* (1940) comprises five photographs made from a single location over what appears to be a limited period of time — a matter of minutes, probably less than an hour. These photographs, made without moving the camera, look down from a cliff above the Pacific Ocean. They show subsequent moments as littoral foam swells and ebbs. Stieglitz's serial work that Callahan could have known includes his cloud series, begun in 1922; the portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe, comprised of photographs made between 1917 and 1932; and a series made between 1931 and 1935 of views of new New York buildings seen from Stieglitz's room in the Shelton. Stieglitz's series are without the unity of time and place of Adams's *Surf Sequence*. Instead, each series

contains pictures made at different times, as much as years apart. In terms of spatial unity, only the series New York views from the Shelton depends, as does *Surf Sequence*, on a repetition of near identical images for its power.

The earlier Callahan photographs discussed in this essay are in groups that are perhaps too small to be considered series. Nevertheless, the individual photographs are changed and enhanced when placed in the context of the related images. When seen together they possess a unity of place that becomes an obvious and important element in the work. As various women pass the milliner's window, Callahan creates a kind of musical fugue with theme (the window and its mannequins) and variations (as passerbys come and go). As noted above, the photographs of pedestrians before the dark shadows (Plates 3 and 4) depend for their success on photographic rather than retinal seeing. When these two photographs are juxtaposed, one sees the precise replication of what remains the same in them, giving added emphasis to their technological origin.

The photographs of women's heads, on the other hand, do not have this same structure. Although some of them become visually uniform and cohere into a series as their backgrounds become similarly solid black or out-of-focus gray, the passage of time at a single location is not an issue for them. Rather, these pictures depend upon a similarity of intention and process. As serial images, the women shoppers replicate one of the experiences of the modern city: close physical proximity with successive, anonymous individuals. At the same time, the presentation of these photographs as a series emphasizes that they are machine-made images and hence modern; only a machine (or an obsessive artist) could render so completely and similarly so many different anonymous individuals.

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In these photographs made between 1943 and 1945 Callahan was trying to break free of the influences that had formed him — first the conventionalized pictorialism of camera clubs, then the veristic classicism of Adams — in order to reach a style that would be his own. That these pictures look unlike the pictures Callahan made later — they are gritty and messy rather than cool and clean — does not mean that Callahan

had failed. Comments that Callahan has made, beginning as early as 1946, suggest that to him *making* photographs is more important than the specific photographs produced. If Callahan's photographic style is therefore understood in terms of process rather than results, these pictures, *and* the process that went into their production, should be seen as one of Callahan's first coherent independent statements. In this early work it is the novelty of conception, and persistence of effort, that marks it as Callahan's.

But to stop at this would be to take Callahan totally at his word, that technical novelty is the only means of expression within his work. To do so denies the expressive content of the work's more literal subject. Callahan's power to create images that are mythic and meditative, that rise above the contingent and specific to be universal statements of intensely felt observation, is clear in his later work; his pictures of his wife Eleanor come to mind. But this power to create universal imagery is present already in these early works. The formal means he uses to do so have been analyzed extensively above: the use of a shallow space parallel to the picture plane with theatrical side lighting, made even more dramatic by high-contrast processing. But these means go beyond achieving technical novelty, to still the subjects, to hold them motionless for close, steady observation. In the very process that expunges the accidental and emphasizes the universal, the figures that Callahan finds on the streets of Detroit and later Chicago, New York, and Providence become mythic representations of people — women, shoppers, Americans — held still by Callahan's camera and formal means to submit to our close and careful scrutiny.

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NOTES

¹ Telephone conversation with the author, November 4, 1989.

² One indication of the growth of amateur photography in 1937–38 was the founding of three major magazines to serve the needs of hobbyist photographers: *Minicam: The Miniature Camera Monthly* (which was to become *Modern Photography* in 1949) and *Popular Photography*, in 1937; and *U.S. Camera Magazine*, in 1938.

³ The number of camera clubs listed in the *American Annual of Photography* increased every year during the thirties, growing, for example, from 108 clubs in 1934 to about 670 in 1940. A 1940 survey canvassed about 1300 camera clubs and estimated a total of 5,000 clubs. Christian A. Peterson, *Pictorialism in America: The Minneapolis Salon of Photography, 1932–1946*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1983, p. 10.

⁴ These were Todd Webb, Don Shapero, Arthur Siegel, and Joe Munroe, all of whom went on to make their livings in photography.

⁵ Callahan recalls that among Adams's photographs he saw at the workshop, at most two were 11x14 prints, with the rest divided equally between 8x10s and smaller prints (5x7 or 4x5). Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989. According to Christian Peterson (*Pictorialism in America*, p. 41), "from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s... the average dimensions of salon photographs rose from 8x10 inches to 14x17 inches and 16x20 inches."

⁶ Callahan's newfound commitment to contact printing did not go unobserved. By April 1942, Don Shapero had initiated a deal in which Callahan traded his unused enlarger for a Deardorf view camera that made 8x10-inch negatives that could be contact printed. Callahan did not enlarge his large (9x12cm- and 8x10-inch) negatives again until he moved to Chicago in 1946 and had access to enlargers at the Institute of Design.

While the small size of Callahan's prints put him in a minority among camera club members, within a few years defense-related paper shortages would make them less anomalous. In 1944, Frank Fraprie, the editor of *American*

Photography, "applauded the rollback the war had imposed on the ever-increasing average size of exhibition prints." Peterson, *Pictorialism in America*, p. 41.

⁷ Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, February 3 and 7, 1941, Ansel Adams Archive, Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, reprinted in *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916–1984*, ed. Mary Street Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1988), pp. 126–7.

⁸ These pictures, previously dated 1941, were more likely made between September 1941 and 1943. According to Callahan (interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989), it is unlikely that in the four months of 1941 remaining after the workshop he made all the photographs he later dated to that time. The only terminus for this period of work is Callahan's rejection of Adams's influence, sometime in 1943.

The first figure reproduces a 9½x13-inch enlargement of the 9x12cm negative, probably made after September 1946 (see note 6, above).

⁹ "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography," in *Harry Callahan Photographs: An Exhibition from the Hallmark Photographic Collection*, ed. Keith Davis (Kansas City, Missouri: Hallmark Cards, Inc., 1981), p. 54. "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography" is the edited transcription of a videotape interview conducted with Callahan at the Center for Creative Photography by Harold Jones and Terence Pitts in February 1977.

¹⁰ "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography," p. 54.

¹¹ Conversation with the author, New York City, January 20, 1990. Adams's concern that snow be presented in a technically correct way was surprisingly in line with the concerns of pictorialist photographers, for whom the ability to render accurately the textures and tones of snow was a sort of touchstone. In choosing to make photographs that obscured the detail of snow, Callahan was rejecting not only Adams's guidance but the advice offered by countless articles that appeared in camera magazines each winter, such as this random example: "A snowscape is boring if both sky and snowfields print white. To overcome this a filter is used" (Andrew Wylie, "Meet Winter With Your Camera," *Minicam*, January 1940, p. 23).

¹² Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989. The print Adams acquired (Callahan never sent him a bill) is now in the Adams collection at the Center for Creative Photography 76:307:002.

¹³ Harry M. Callahan, "An Adventure in Photography," *Minicam*, February 1946, pp. 28–29. The five-paragraph text accompanies reproductions of four photographs that appear without captions or titles: two are of weeds in

snow and two are of light reflecting on water.

In terms of understanding when Callahan came under the influence of the aesthetics of Hungarian-born Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy, it is important to note that this article, in which Callahan stresses the interplay of experimentation and expression, appeared before Callahan began teaching at Moholy's Institute of Design in Chicago. This suggests that to whatever extent the attitudes expressed in the essay reflect the thinking of Moholy or the Bauhaus, they would most likely have come to Callahan through Arthur Siegel, who had studied at Moholy's New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1938.

¹⁴ "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography," p. 54.

¹⁵ Although Callahan has said he purchased the Contax in 1941 or 1942, he has described (conversation with the author, New York City, January 20, 1990) a sequence of events that suggests a later date. After the workshop (August/September 1941), Callahan remained totally committed to Adams's aesthetic (full tonal range achieved through large format cameras and contact prints) for a year or more, before he rebelled in the snow and water reflection photographs (late 1942 or 1943), after which he purchased the Contax (probably 1943).

¹⁶ In addition to *Detroit*, 1943, Callahan used the 9x12 to make at least two other multiple-exposure photographs of Detroit streets in 1943, as well as a Detroit street photograph (Hallmark Collection), dated to 1942.

¹⁷ Telephone conversation with the author, November 27, 1989. Haarz said he shared with Callahan a two-man bay in the contact printing room during Callahan's first six or seven months at GM Photographic, after which Haarz was transferred to another darkroom (*i.e.*, during the summer of 1944). Callahan's employment at GM continued until October 12, 1945.

¹⁸ "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography," p. 54. Callahan's use of contact paper for enlarging was not unique. Calling it untrue that enlarging paper is necessary for making enlargements, the May 1940 "Foto-Fallacies" column in *Minicam* (p. 28) pointed out that contact papers, including Azo, could be used for enlargements: "Theoretically, any enlarger can make a print on the slowest paper, provided a long enough exposure is given."

¹⁹ Telephone conversation with the author, November 27, 1989.

²⁰ The ability to seemingly choreograph figures within a public space continues in Callahan's work, as Keith Davis has noted in reference to *Providence*, a 1968 photograph. See Keith Davis, *Harry Callahan: New Color; Photographs 1978–1987* (Kansas City, Missouri: Hallmark Cards, Inc., 1988), pp. 18–9 and fig. 12.

- ²¹ On Atget's influence on subsequent artists, see John Szarkowski, "Understanding of Atget," in John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, vol. 4: *Modern Times* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), pp. 9–29. On Cartier-Bresson's appreciation of Atget, see Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1987), pp. 32–3.
- ²² Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ²³ John Dennison, "Window Shopping," *Minicam*, November 1938, p. 33.
- ²⁴ According to Ross Haarz (telephone conversation with the author, November 27, 1989), Callahan was working on these pictures when the two shared a work bay between January and the summer of 1944. Although Callahan wrote "1942" on the mounts of some of these photographs this evidence suggests that the pictures were made during the winter of 1943 to 1944; there is no documentation to prove that Callahan did not continue on the project until his departure from Detroit for New York in fall 1945.
- ²⁵ Harry Callahan, untitled statement, *Photographs: Harry Callahan* (Santa Barbara, California: Van Riper and Thompson, 1964), n.p.
- ²⁶ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ²⁷ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ²⁸ Harry Callahan, untitled statement, n.p.
- ²⁹ Andrea Fisher, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women* (New York: Pandora, 1987), pp. 102–19.
- ³⁰ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ³¹ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ³² Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ³³ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.
- ³⁴ Allen Lekus, "Ideas, Illustrated," *Minicam*, March 1938, p. 14.
- ³⁵ F. G. Halverson, "'Thought' Photography," *Minicam*, November 1938, p. 23.
- ³⁶ This comparison between Smith and Callahan is made in the press release, presumably written by Edward Steichen, for the 1952 Museum of Modern Art exhibition that was the first in its "Diogenes With A Camera" series: Smith, whose photographs in the show included a series on a black nurse mid-wife and excerpts from his Spanish Village series, both for *Life*, "injects himself, his feelings and his experiences into the picture he produces"; Callahan, represented by a frieze of the 1950 head shots, embodies a "more impersonal, objective point of view towards reality."
- ³⁷ These observations are based on my study of negatives in the Harry Callahan Archive at the Center.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ For example, see Jacob Deschin, "It's All in the Point of View," *Minicam*, September 1937, pp. 26–28, 98ff; and Arthur Brackman, "New Angles for Your Subjects," *Minicam*, September 1939, pp. 20–25.
- ⁴⁰ Arni, "Present Your Friends in a Streamlined Portrait Book," *Minicam*, April 1940, pp. 54–59, 87ff.
- ⁴¹ Jacob Deschin, "Modernistic Mounts," *Minicam*, October 1939, pp. 54–55.
- ⁴² Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), p. 603.
- ⁴³ "Harry Callahan: A Life in Photography," p. 51.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, March 9–12, 1989.

