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The Politics and Poetics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work

By

Elizabeth Margaret Gand

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Emerita Anne Wagner, Chair

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Elizabeth Margaret Gand

Abstract

The Politics and Poetics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work

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Elizabeth Margaret Gand

Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Emerita Anne Middleton Wagner, Chair

This dissertation examines the work of the American photographer, Helen Levitt. It focuses in particular on her first phase of production—the years from 1937 to 1943—when she developed an important archive of pictures documenting children's art and play encountered in the city streets. The dissertation is designed to help us understand the reasons why the subject of urban children's art and play proved so productive for Levitt in her first phase of work. Why did she return again and again to the sight of children at play in the city streets? Why did she expend so much effort collecting children's rude and crude drawings found on the pavement and the brownstone walls? What led her to envision the child as her *genius loci* of the urban streets, and what did she make out of the subject?

Chapter one situates Helen Levitt's initial turn to the child in relation to a surge of child imagery that appeared in the visual culture of the 1930s. It maps the widespread cultural interest in urban children stimulated by Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End*, and it connects Levitt's interest in children's pavement drawings to the Federal Art Project's promotion of child art making.

Chapter two moves the spotlight from Levitt's interest in children's art to her sustained engagement with their play. It demonstrates that street children's play had become a popular photographic trope, and it compares Levitt's vision of children's play to other kinds of images of children circulating in visual culture. In doing so, the chapter shows how Levitt synthesized and transformed standard ideas about the representation of children, as she came to play with photography's kinship to performance, theater, and cinema.

The third chapter focuses on the reception of the pictures. It tracks the initial appearance of Levitt's work in the popular picture press of the day and goes on to consider how her work was evaluated in response to her one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. Setting out to complicate the current critical assumption that reads Levitt's work as apolitical, the



chapter analyzes the sense of social tension that early critics discerned in the pictures. It also discusses Levitt's move from still photography to film-making in the mid to late 1940s.

The fourth and final chapter expands the focus beyond the pictures of children to consider Levitt's street photography as a whole. After narrating the details of her return to still photography in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the chapter considers the question of what makes her overall body of work an important episode in the history of photography. After reviewing some of the main answers that have been offered to that question, I propose that Levitt's photographs are distinctive for their particularly feminist take on the urban streets.

To Linda, who makes everything possible

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I am also keenly grateful for the professionalism, kindness, and courtesy of the hard-working archivists at the Museum of Modern Art, the New York Public Library’s Print and Photography Division, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Museum of the City of New York, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress.

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At the 2008 Spectrum International Prize conference celebrating Helen Levitt’s lifetime achievement, I enjoyed stimulating conversations with Inka Schube, Okswana Bulgowa, Andrea Henkens, and Colin Westerbeck.

I have left for last the two people who were most indispensable to the realization of this project, for they are the hardest to thank adequately. Helen Levitt, who never liked the process of self-promotion, nevertheless let me spend numerous afternoons and evenings in her company at her 5<sup>th</sup> floor walk-up in Greenwich Village. She shared her memories, jokes, and opinions while permitting me to study the photographs that she kept in boxes in her apartment. Together we examined prints, compared variants and contact sheets, and watched *In the Street* on her antiquated television.

The person to whom I owe the largest debt of gratitude is Linda Maier, my partner and best friend, whose love and support kept me going. I thank her with all my heart.

## The Politics and Poetics of Children's Play: Situating Helen Levitt's Early Work

### Introduction

The contradiction is inescapable: although Helen Levitt is widely recognized as a major figure in the history of photography—she has been called “the supreme poet-photographer of the streets and people of New York”<sup>1</sup>—our knowledge of her life and work remains remarkably sketchy. As of this writing, there exist only two substantive scholarly studies of Levitt's career. The first is the catalogue published in conjunction with her 1991 traveling exhibition (which was co-organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Art); the second is Andrea Henkens's German-language dissertation, *Flanerie in der Grossstadt: Auf der Suche nach dem Anderen im Alltäglichen: Surreale Blickweisen in den Fotografien von Helen Levitt*, which has not been published in English. Considering that Levitt's work bears comparison with that of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans, this state of affairs is something of a minor art historical scandal.

This dissertation, then, aims to begin filling in some of the gaps in the Levitt scholarship. Yet it does not attempt to function as a comprehensive monograph. Rather than mapping the entirety of Levitt's career in equal depth and detail across the decades, I focus closely on the crucial early years of 1935-1945, the years when she forged her distinctive brand of street photography and received her first public accolades. My reasons for zeroing in on Levitt's first phase of work derive from two factors: the unusual shape of Levitt's career and the specific questions that I am interested in pursuing.

As I see it, Helen Levitt's artistic life cannot be fit into a normative plot of steady linear development along a single trajectory. Instead of moving from apprenticeship to a ripe mid period, she embarked on what I would call three discrete careers. From 1935 to 1943 or so, Levitt enjoyed steady productivity and rapid success as a still photographer working in the city streets, mostly in her native New York City but also briefly in the outskirts of Mexico City. But in the early to mid 1940s, her attention increasingly shifted from still photography to film-making. By about 1945, her immersion in film seems to have largely eclipsed her work in still photography. Not until 1959 would she return wholeheartedly to street photography as her primary artistic practice.

This study aims to give in-depth attention to the early still pictures, the work that made her name and that continues to stand out as her indelible contribution to the history of photography. In keeping with my focus on the early years, this dissertation devotes much less analysis to the middle and late periods. I provide only a brief sketch of the period of her career when she was primarily working in film, namely, the late forties and the fifties. I leave the details of Levitt's second career in cinema to a film scholar, in part because I am mindful that Jan-Chrisopher Horak has already given us a good summary of her film work in his book, *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema* (discussed in chapter three), though I do endeavor to sketch out the important milestones of her work as a film editor, director, and producer. And although I outline the continuities and differences between the early and late work, I do not lay as much stress on the later pictures.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Improvised City: A Critic at Large,” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2001.

These choices reflect the fact that my main interests reside in a specific subset of Levitt's work: the pictures of children and their chalk graffiti. My dissertation is designed to help us understand the reasons why the subject of urban children's art and play proved so productive for Levitt in her first phase of work. Why did she return again and again to the subject of children at play in the city streets? Why did she expend so much effort collecting children's rude and crude drawings found on the pavement and the brownstone walls? What led her to envision the child as her *genius loci* of the urban streets, and what did she make out of the subject?

A major contention driving this dissertation is that Levitt's early success grew out of the special resonance that accrued to the child as a cultural sign. With that in mind, I work to situate her turn to the child in relation to the many kinds of pictures of children that were circulating in visual culture in the 1930s. By focusing on her iconography of the child, I aim to give serious analysis to an aspect of Levitt's work that is clearly important, but which has tended to be misread, under-examined, or trivialized in the available literature. For example, in his book, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present*,<sup>2</sup> John Pultz represents Helen Levitt as a figure working "independently" whose "photographs of children at play in the urban density of New York City ignore the larger social ills of poverty, the rise of fascism, and the threat of war to depict a world that seems free of anxieties." This seems to me entirely mistaken. As I set out to show, Levitt's own turn to the child was by no means idiosyncratic or even unusual. On the contrary, she adopted the figure of the street child at a time when it had a widespread currency and a robust history in photographic production precisely because it could so effectively signify the "ills of poverty, the rise of fascism, and the threat war..." And the critics who responded to her pictures of urban children when they first came into view between 1939 and 1945 implicitly linked them to the social and political anxieties of the day.

A primary goal of the dissertation, then, is to historicize Levitt's early photographs of children playing in the city streets. I situate her interest in the subject within the context of a widespread iconography of the child that emerged in the mid to late 1930s, the period when Levitt formed her eye. I propose that we should read her attention to children as driven by the intersection of multiple cultural, rather than primarily personal, interests, though I am also interested in the process by which Levitt came to select her subject and to imbue it with significance.

In chapter one, "Finding the Subject: Helen Levitt's Initial Turn to the Child, 1935-1937," after reviewing the current state of the writing on Levitt's photographs of children, I discuss the surge of child imagery that appeared in the visual culture of the 1930s. I proceed to weave together a narrative of Levitt's early development as a photographer with an account of the widespread cultural interest in urban children that followed in the wake of the critical and popular success of Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End*. The chapter culminates by examining the work Levitt did for the Federal Art Project in 1937, when she amassed an extensive photographic archive of children's graffiti art found in the city streets. I connect her interest in collecting children's art with the FAP's concerted efforts to exhibit, celebrate, and foster children's art-making, which I analyze as a continuation of a larger history of interest in children's art that extends from the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that Levitt's in-depth work with children's art was a crucial breakthrough in her development as a photographer, for it allowed her both to challenge the standard notion of the child as innocent and to move closer to her own fascination with the body as a site of meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> Pultz, J. *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), pp. 93-94

In chapter two, “World as Stage: Play, Performance, and Theatricality in Levitt’s Early Work, ca. 1938-1940,” I examine Levitt’s turn from urban children’s art to their play. I explain that Levitt was far from alone in focusing her lens on the sight of children playing on the city’s stoops, sidewalks, and streets: the subject had a real currency and a robust history in the photographic culture of the late 1930s and 1940s. Establishing four categories of production that mattered to Levitt’s sense of the subject—the ethnographic document, the reformist vision, the entertaining vignette and the surrealist icon—I propose that Levitt synthesized and reimagined these four ways of looking at children. In doing so, I argue, she rejected the ethos of documentary photography that prevailed in the 1930s in order to play with photography’s kinship to theater, performance, and cinema. Finally, chapter two links Levitt’s increasing ambition as a photographer to her important relationships with her friends and colleagues, Janice Loeb, James Agee, and Walker Evans.

Chapter three, “Levitt’s Work in the Public Eye: The Politics of the Pictures, 1940-1945,” shifts from what Levitt produced to the details of how her work was first received. I track the appearance of Levitt’s photographs in the important magazines *Fortune* and *PM* prior to the work’s ascension into the space of the museum, establishing the links between her vision and the new visual culture of the photographically illustrated magazine that emerged in the late 1930s. I also examine the brief time Levitt spent working in Mexico, and the initial reception of the Mexico work in the pages of *PM*. In looking closely at the circulation of Levitt’s pictures and the responses articulated to them, I ask what kinds of politics they seemed to suggest to viewers at the time. I call into question the current critical consensus that holds that her work is free of political or social concern, that it is best understood as a disinterested art to be cherished for its lyrical beauty. Instead, I suggest, for early audiences who articulated their responses in print, Levitt’s work seemed remarkable both for the subtlety of its attention to class and race and for the power of its aesthetic achievement.

The fourth and final chapter, “the Women at the Window: Helen Levitt’s Feminism: Regendering Street Photography,” works to conclude the study by widening the field of focus, as it were. It begins by offering a brief account of the direction her work took starting in 1959, when she re-devoted herself to still photography, and then opens onto a broad question meant to re-connect the pictures of children with those of adults so as to think through the work as a whole: What makes Levitt’s work a significant and enduring episode in the history of photography? In other words: why do these pictures remain compelling to viewers? To begin addressing those questions, I conduct a chronological review of the key writings composed in response to Levitt’s work from the 1940s through the 1990s. By delineating the main ways of evaluating her work that have been offered, I show that the critical responses have shifted over time: there has been a steady aestheticization of her work, such that the early responders’ alertness to the pictures’ social acuity has been submerged into a predominantly aesthetic set of criteria. The pictures have come to be accepted as art, whereas they once existed between the categories of social documentary investigation and artistic achievement. Having established the *uncertain* politics of the pictures, I work to re-politicize our readings of the pictures by drawing attention to the politics of gender and sexuality that inform street photography. My thesis holds that Levitt’s photographic archive stands out for its distinctly feminist take on the urban streets. I locate the visual signs of that feminism in her peculiar attention to looking, desire, and the spaces of female sociability. In theorizing Levitt as a feminist flâneur, I circle back to the pictures of children in order to propose that they too bespeak an account of urban experience that deliberately evokes a working-class woman’s view of the streets.

In conducting research and formulating these chapters, I have worked from numerous interviews conducted in person and on the telephone with Levitt from 2006 until her death in 2009. I remain deeply grateful to Levitt for the opportunity to spend time with her, and I am equally indebted to Sandra Phillips and the Luce Fellowship in American Art for making those interviews possible, as mentioned in the acknowledgments section. Helen tended to resist public scrutiny of her work, partly because she was not a talkative person, but mostly because she truly distrusted the ceremonies of celebrity. Although her memory had faded somewhat by the time we met, it has been important to bring her voice and perspective to bear on this project, not least because it is conceived as part of feminist art history's efforts to reclaim the significance of women's cultural contributions.

One obstacle to fully understanding Levitt's work has been the absence of an organized archive. She allowed me to study the pictures that she kept in her home in her personal archive, but at the time of my visits it remained unsorted and uncatalogued. Although I would have liked to help her to catalogue her work, it was not something that Levitt was then prepared to do. This means that my dissertation unfortunately does not solve the persistent uncertainty about the dates of her pictures. Instead, it functions as an effort to understand how the work signified in its time, and why it remains a compelling episode in the history of photography.



## Finding the Subject: Helen Levitt's Initial Turn to the Child, 1935-1937

"A good subject may accelerate the development of a good craftsman." Lincoln Kirstein<sup>1</sup>

### I. Looking at Levitt's Pictures of Children

Between 1937 and 1940, Helen Levitt formulated a compelling vision of urban life. She did so by devising an imaginary protagonist who quickly became the scene-stealing star of her photographic theater: the wild child, the "underprivileged street urchin"<sup>2</sup> or "miniature Harlem ragamuffin" (as *Time* magazine put it in 1943)<sup>3</sup>, otherwise known in the parlance of the time as the "slum child."<sup>4</sup> Levitt came into her own as a photographer when she began to photograph children staging their "deadly serious"<sup>5</sup> games of make-believe in the derelict neighborhoods of the modern metropolis.

Consider her picture of three boys leaping and turning in the "weird climax"<sup>6</sup> of their play (fig. 1). This photograph can stand for the strange potency that Levitt brought to the subject. It was likely made in 1939, at the moment when the theme of the child became the mainstay of her practice. It is the kind of picture that catalyzed her breakthrough into the public eye, transforming the young photographer of the 1930s from a neophyte sorting out the possibilities and purposes of her medium into an acclaimed artist.

There is much that the picture refuses to give its viewers. It divulges precious little information, ignoring the journalistic staples of who, what, where, when and why. The photograph lacks a caption or title that might explain in what part of town Levitt found this vacant lot, or the identity of these young boys battling it out with a tree branch. Their dark hair and skin suggest they might be Puerto Rican, and Levitt was known to work in Spanish Harlem, so it may belong to the "section around the 110<sup>th</sup> Street station of the Lexington Avenue subway," where "Puerto Ricans, Cubans, American Negroes, West Indian Negroes, South Americans and Mexicans" live "side by side."<sup>7</sup> According to the 1939 *Federal Writers' Project WPA Guide to New York City*, "With little money to spend, the residents of this neighborhood

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln Kirstein "Photography in the United States," 1934 radio address on the state of photography in America, published as an essay in Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Art in America in Modern Times* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934).

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine G. Freimann, "Photo Display at Art Museum Considered Outstanding Exhibit," *The Fort Wayne, Indiana Journal-Gazette*, March 19, 1944, review of "City Children at Play: Photographs by Helen Levitt," clipping from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Exhibit file II.1.46.2.

<sup>3</sup> "Snooper with a Camera," unsigned review of Levitt's 1943 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in *Time*, March 29, 1943.

<sup>4</sup> This term surfaces repeatedly in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including in the pages of *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982. First edition published by the Guilds Committee for Federal Writers' Publications, Inc., 1939)

and in the March 1943 issue of *Minicam* Magazine (vol. 6) in an article titled "Any Woman Can Take Good Pictures! Says Florence Ward," by Ann Margot Davidson within a caption that reads "The Mimics: The natural play of slum children in the city parks of New York has furnished endless subject matter." See chapter two for further discussion of these examples.

<sup>5</sup> John Adam Knight, "Review by John Adam Knight," *U.S. Camera* vol. 6 #4, 1943, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> James Thrall Soby, "The Art of Poetic Accident: Photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt." *Minicam*, March 1943, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York*. op. cit. p. 265–266.

have few and simple amusements.”<sup>8</sup> Battling it out with a tree branch is surely a low cost, if hardly simple, amusement. But Levitt permits her viewers only to make inferences. Unlike so many other photographers working at the time, she refrained from including textual clues that would provide the rationale for her photographic scenes. Instead, she cultivated a quality of mystery, striving to make photographs that read not as factual documents but as strange epiphanies.<sup>9</sup>

That downplaying of the usual informational function of the photograph sets Levitt’s early work apart from the documentary ideal that became (and has long been seen as) the *locus classicus* of 1930s photography. Take as an example Walker Evans’s famous portrait, *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife [Allie Mae Burroughs]*, 1936, which can stand as a foil to Levitt’s way of seeing (fig. 1.2). Using a large format camera mounted on a tripod, Evans strives for a meticulous clarity of description, elucidating, one by one, each strand of hair, grain of wood and patterned fabric dot, each wrinkle, freckle, and bone. This necessitates holding the subject still, both literally—his is an unabashedly *posed* portrait—and figuratively, since the gazes exchanged between photographer and subject are thoroughly *composed*. The picture seems to pin its subject to the wall as if she were a mounted specimen in a lepidopterist’s collection.

The preternatural stillness of Evans’s portrait finds its polar opposite in Levitt’s scene of three boys’ playing. Partly this is a function of photographic method: Levitt used a Leica, a small, light, hand-held camera developed from cinema technology; like a movie camera, it used rolled 35 millimeter film. (During the years when she was working as a film editor, Levitt would scavenge remnants of film stock and roll it by hand in her darkened closet, “and I’d be ready for the next day’s work.”<sup>10</sup>) But it is much more than a matter of equipment. It is a question of why she wanted to represent children at the moment their breath is sped up, muscles tensed, and nerves awake.

Indeed, important (but little known) visual evidence points to the fact that Levitt actively sought to shape her scenes in order to produce her effects of mystery, epiphany, and animate tension. For all the off-the-cuff snapshot quality of the pictures, she was in fact exceedingly deliberate about the effects she aimed to convey. This becomes abundantly clear when we compare examples of her most celebrated works, such as figure 1.1 and figure 1.4,<sup>11</sup> with variants that show her responding, experimenting, and repositioning herself in search of what she would call “a proper shot.”<sup>12</sup> The difference between the published versus the rejected frames hinges on the kinetic presentation of bodies in space. In the fully realized version of figure 1.1, all three boys hover above the ground, poised on one foot, suspended in motion. In the variant (fig. 1b), they stand solidly on two feet, earthbound and un-transfigured. Equally important is Levitt’s ability to seize the moment when the three leaping boys form a circle, and to position herself in relation to that circle so that their bodies are isolated, de Chirico-style, in a strangely stage-like space.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 267.

<sup>9</sup> A.D. Coleman, “Helen Levitt’s Sidelong Glance at a Vanished City,” *New York Observer*, April 4, 1991, p.25 also uses the term “epiphany”: “What Ms. Levitt offers at her best is a vision of the street life of poor and working-class New York City neighborhoods as the urban version of an enchanted forest: a theatrically energized context ripe with magic and bursting with epiphany.”

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.21.2008.

<sup>11</sup> The variants of figure 1.4 are discussed in detail in chapter two.

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2008. Levitt described her street practice as a matter of working quickly and then rethinking the scene at the printing stage: “When you work fast, you see the main thing. You have to work fast. You get a second chance when you print to think about it.” Author interview with Levitt, 12.9.2007.

## II. Critical Writing on Levitt's Work with Children

The visual evidence and the critical consensus are both clear: Helen Levitt's work "blossomed" when she began to photograph urban children's art and play seriously and in depth from 1937-1938 and onwards.<sup>13</sup> But do we know why children were the transformative element in her development? What specifically about children made the subject so compelling and productive to the photographer and her early audience? How should we interpret and understand the power of these pictures? What kinds of pleasures, challenges, and meanings do they offer to their viewers?

Maria Morris Hambourg, whose biographical essay is an indispensable foundation for understanding Levitt's life and work, attributes the photographer's persistent interest in children to their purportedly innate "unself-consciousness," which makes them "uncommonly good subjects for the photographer who wishes to capture instinctual, unstaged response."<sup>14</sup> Quoting Dzigo Vertov, Morris Hambourg explains that Levitt's goal was, like his, "to photograph people... 'at a moment when they are not acting and letting the camera strip their thoughts bare.'"<sup>15</sup>

The observation Hambourg borrowed from Vertov illuminates an important aspect of Levitt's work. Her street pictures convey a powerful effect of "candidness" through their emphasis on physicality, spontaneity, and instantaneity. She was intensely fascinated by the kinetic dimension of play (see fig. 1.1, 1.3, and 1.4). Through her regard for kinesis, her pictures work to defeat what Roland Barthes calls the mortifying effects of the camera's gaze, the stiltedness of the pose.<sup>16</sup> Yet the notion that Levitt sought out children because she needed a subject that would allow her to circumvent the stultifying effects of the camera will take us only so far. Such a claim implies that the formal properties of the picture drive the photographer's decisions above all; that the subject matters to the extent that it results in a formally accomplished picture.

Moreover, the question of the subject-caught-unawares is a tricky one when talking about Levitt's work. Certainly since the 1940s, commentators have been fascinated by her extraordinary capacity to photograph children's fantasy worlds without disturbing their autonomy and self-absorption. For example, on March 29, 1943 *Time* magazine reported on MOMA's exhibition "Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt" by declaring that: "Critics wondered how she did it—her subjects seemed to have absolutely no idea that a camera was anywhere around."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the thoughtful critic John Adam Knight, writing in *U.S. Camera* in May of 1943, asserted that Levitt gets "truth...into her pictures by taking them when her subjects are unaware they are being watched."<sup>18</sup> In this line of thinking, the camera tends to produce factitiousness; Levitt's achievement resides in her ability to avoid the usual sham effects

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg writes that "Once Levitt's art blossomed in 1938-39 with the photographs of children playing, she made few changes in her approach." op. cit. p.55. I would date the blossoming slightly earlier, to her expansive effort to document children's chalk drawings found in the streets, which began in 1937.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.50

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.54

<sup>16</sup> I am drawing here from the work of Suzanne Holschbach, "The Pose: Its Troubles and Pleasures" in *Street and Studio: An Urban History of Photography*, (Ute Eskildsen, ed. London: Tate Publishing, 2008), who writes "Generally speaking, the pose...[is] seen to be stilted or artificial." p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> Unsigned review, "Snooper with a Camera," *Time*, March 29, 1943.

<sup>18</sup> "Review by John Adam Knight," *U.S. Camera*, May 1943, vol. 6 #4: 17.

of the mechanical gaze. Yet some of Levitt's most vivid pictures acquire their uncanny immediacy precisely from the interaction of children with the camera. As a case in point, the brusque energy that enlivens the photograph of four boys pretending to be foreign legionnaires comes from the gestures they perform extravagantly for the camera (fig. 1.5). Pressing his hand to his heart, one boy seems on the verge of speaking, provoking a sense of uncanny presence; his sidekick reaches out to the audience with an extended arm.<sup>19</sup> This is hardly an anomalous picture in Levitt's oeuvre. It was singled out as the lead photograph in Levitt's 1943 debut one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt" (fig. 1.6), where it was placed beside the introductory plaque giving the artist's name and the show's title, and below the subtitle "Improvisations," which designated one of the seven thematic groupings around which the works were organized.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the vivid confrontation of child and camera recurs in other photographs, too. There is, for instance, the closely related scene of five boys playing in a vacant lot, where once again the picture coheres around the gesture of a boy pressing his hand to his heart like an actor poised to recite a soliloquy (fig. 1.8). Or the photograph (also included in the 1943 exhibition) of a boy guarding his playmates' territory by stretching his arms wide: he, too, acknowledges the camera's presence with a direct look.

It is insufficient, then, to conclude that children mattered to Helen Levitt by virtue of their unconcern for the camera. In fact, it is risky to generalize too quickly about the pictures of children, for they constitute a large archive of varied scenes—really at least two overlapping archives, one consisting of photographs documenting children's chalk drawings and graffiti messages found in the street, another scenes of animated play. Levitt's interest in children's sidewalk art, which began in 1937, led her to amass more than 160 specimens of the phenomenon. It matters (as I will discuss) that Levitt's sustained attention to children's art preceded her breakthrough scenes of their play, which the current evidence suggests crystallized in 1938. We need both a nuanced analysis of the chronological/thematic patterns of the pictures and a better sense of why Levitt devoted herself so avidly to investigating children's art and play.

In a recent essay (2001), the photography scholar Ellen Handy paved the way for that task. Her article "Helen Levitt: Childhood as Performance, City as Theater" lays out some useful points for getting hold of Levitt's most productive theme.<sup>21</sup> One of Handy's contributions is to underscore the fact that Levitt narrowed in quite selectively on specific kinds of play:<sup>22</sup> those that involve *performance*. Levitt's children dance, leap, act out gunfights or sword play, pose in masks, and contrive worlds of their own. The photographer excluded from her vision such rule-bound, goal-oriented games as marbles or handball, which one finds in the work of her contemporary, Ben Shahn (fig. 1.9). Handy theorizes that "Levitt's work is virtually a treatise upon the often unseen real lives of children and their engrossing work of creating their own identities through performative play."

Although Handy is surely right to stress the performative dimension of play that is so marked in Levitt's work, I do not agree with her wider interpretative framework. Handy sees Levitt's pictures as transparent documents that provide information—"virtually a treatise," she

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<sup>19</sup> The photograph also appears as the cover image in the 1965 Museum of Modern Art edition of *A Way of Seeing*.

<sup>20</sup> Exhibition checklist, n.d. MOMA Archives Curatorial Exhibition file #221. The seven subsections are listed as: THE STREETS, MASKS, IMPROVISATIONS, PORTRAITS, CHALK DRAWINGS, EMOTIONS, MEXICO.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen Handy, "Helen Levitt: Childhood as Performance, City as Theater," *The Lion and The Unicorn* 25 (2001): 206–225.

<sup>22</sup> Morris Hambourg also observes, "It is interesting that she did not choose to depict routine or organized play such as the hopscotch, jump rope, and stickball of her youth, but rather exclusively the play of the imagination." *op. cit.* p.53.

says—about children’s “real lives.” But photographs do not offer us reality whole and untransformed. The photograph abstracts, flattens, snips away, and freezes; it reduces the three dimensional temporal-spatial weave into a two-dimensional object; it isolates and de-contextualizes. Moreover, although Levitt’s pictures provide vivid visual descriptions of material events, they withhold supplementary information that would enhance their value in the construction of knowledge, as I mentioned earlier. Levitt’s photographs tell us virtually nothing about the children’s real lives, not their names, narratives, or histories. Instead, the photographs are themselves performances of selection and condensation; they perform visual dream-work, not scientific explanation.

Moreover, I disagree with Handy’s comments on the larger significance of children’s play in Levitt’s oeuvre. According to Handy, the play that Levitt pictorialized so ardently is in fact a form of “work”: “The children’s continuing performances render the streets as...a factory of identity in which they labor to form themselves through their engagement with the world.”<sup>23</sup> Handy bases this claim on Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, published in 1945, quoting Spock’s utilitarian conception of play as “...training...for useful work later...A child loves his play, not because it’s easy, but because it’s hard. He is striving every hour of every day to graduate to more difficult achievements.”<sup>24</sup> The inadequacy of this theory of play is two-fold. First, it rests on a historical slippage, in which Spock’s post-World War II conception of play as “training” for “useful work”—the need to conform even as a child to the demands of a society modeled on business—gets grafted anachronistically onto a set of photographs that took shape largely between 1937 and 1943, in the starkly different cultural climate of the Depression and World War II. Secondly, it shrinks a vast and fascinating topic—the attributes and meanings of play—down to the voice of a single popular writer. This is too small a field for thinking about Levitt’s approach to play, not least considering that Johann Huizinga’s magisterial *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* was published in 1938, the very year when children’s play crystallized as Levitt’s leitmotif.

A more historically careful consideration of Levitt’s attention to children’s play is available in Sandra S. Phillips’s essay, “Helen Levitt’s New York,” published with Morris Hambourg’s in the artist’s 1991 retrospective exhibition catalogue. Phillips links Levitt’s interest in children to the rise of attention to vernacular subjects and the influx of surrealism into American culture in the late 1930s.<sup>25</sup> She also briefly sketches changing concepts of children, arguing that “Children were being discovered at this moment to have their own psychology,” citing the rise of child-focused psychoanalytic theorizing in the work of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, and Harry Stack Sullivan “who interwove a child psychology with an anthropology that considered children as almost a different species, with their own development into adulthood.”

I share Phillips’s interest in the new kinds of analysis brought to bear on children in the 1930s. This strikes me as an important line of research to consider in relation to Levitt’s work, but what remains unclear in Phillips’s account is precisely the relation—the means of transmission—between the psychologists’ theorizing and the production of Levitt’s pictures.

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<sup>23</sup> Handy, op. cit. p.207. With all due respect to Handy, I think it is historically wrongheaded to compare Levitt’s theatricalized city to a factory, in light of the fact that so many images—paintings, prints, photographs—of factories were made in the 1930s. One thinks of Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* murals of 1932-33 as the exemplary case, but the iconography of the factory was widespread at the time, because questions of factory labor loomed large in the face of massive unemployment and labor strife.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.210.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips, Sandra S. “Helen Levitt’s New York,” *Helen Levitt*. 1991 exhibition catalogue, op. cit. p.30.

How would the high-school dropout Levitt have picked up on these new notions about children as “a different species”?

Let me sum up, then, some of the key elements that seem to be missing from these otherwise helpful readings. One is a precise understanding of the motivations and intentions that drew Levitt to the subject—an analysis that can reclaim the period eye with which children were regarded in the 1930s. Also needed is an incisive account of how class, as well as race and gender, function in these depictions, for Levitt chose deliberately to represent children coded quite explicitly as working class and racially heterogeneous (and the children’s groupings are almost always homosocial as well, often male). Childhood itself does not exist outside the bounds of history, social organization and economic relations; it is thoroughly conditioned by the nexus of possibilities and restraints that determine adult lives.<sup>26</sup>

### **III. Thinking about Children**

In a sense, it is not surprising that such astute scholars would treat the significance of children so cursorily, for children themselves inhabit a marginal social position.<sup>27</sup> From the root meaning of the word *infant*—*infans*, without language—to the modern paradigm of the sheltered, vulnerable child—“economically ‘useless,’ emotionally ‘priceless,’”<sup>28</sup>—20<sup>th</sup> century ideals of childhood have imagined it as a period of exclusion from power and agency (whether political, economic, or social). It is no coincidence that in everyday speech, the term *childish* connotes the trivial, the minor, the foolish.

Challenging these received ideas, a generation of social historians has demonstrated that childhood itself constitutes a historically variable category of human experience, and one that merits investigation.<sup>29</sup> The foundational scholarship on this topic is of course Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood*, which argues that in the middle ages, children were treated as small adults; the concept of childhood as a fundamentally different phase of life did not prevail.<sup>30</sup> Building on Ariès’s work, the new histories of childhood inform us that the 1930s—Levitt’s moment of emergence as a photographer—witnessed intense social and political debates contesting the ideals, expectations, and realities of American childhood. The Depression’s duration and depth had “ignited” a widespread fear that America faced a “youth crisis,” as it was called in the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> The statistical picture was grim: historians reckon that one out of five

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<sup>26</sup> As the historian Steven Mintz writes, the experiences of childhood is shaped by the diversifications of gender, class, and race, but “social class is the most significant determinant of children’s well-being.” *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004) p. ix.

<sup>27</sup> According to Mintz, “The history of childhood is often treated as a marginal subject, and there is no question that it is especially difficult to write. Children are rarely obvious historical actors... Their powerlessness makes them less visible than other social groups.” *Ibid.*, p.viii.

<sup>28</sup> Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) cited in Joseph Hawes, *Childhood between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920-1940* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), p21.

<sup>29</sup> Among the essential contributions to this field are Paula Fass and Mary Ann Mason, eds. *Childhood in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and At Play* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social history of family life* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> Mintz, chapter 12, “Coming of Age in the Depression,” *op. cit.* p. 234.

children in New York City suffered from malnutrition.<sup>32</sup> The intensity of suffering produced an emergent consensus that children deserved government-funded assistance. From the late 1930s through the early 1940s, government programs began to intervene in children's lives to a degree previously unprecedented. Roosevelt created a new National Youth Administration, instituted an Aid to Dependent Children Program, and in 1940 convened a "Conference on Children in a Democracy."<sup>33</sup>

Two sea changes in the social construction of American childhood date to the 1930s. The first occurred in 1938, when the Supreme Court outlawed child labor. It had taken activists decades of effort to accomplish this feat. The photographs of Lewis Hine played a crucial role in turning public opinion against the exploitation of child laborers in the nation's factories, mines, and mills. It is worth noting that a Lewis Hine retrospective appeared at New York's Riverside Museum in 1939 (this is discussed in greater detail in chapter two).<sup>34</sup> The passage of child labor laws secured the legal definition of childhood as a space apart from capitalist labor. They also had the consequence of making high school a newly universal requirement by the late 1930s, which helped to solidify a relatively new category of person: the teenager.<sup>35</sup> Yet even as children began to be sheltered from the burdens of labor, they were being swept into the cacophony of mass culture. The commercialization of childhood was the second great change ushered in during the 1930s, by means that ranged from Walt Disney movies to marketing directed at children as a newly targeted "consumer group." In sum, the 1930s introduced a contradictory transformation of childhood: it was increasingly defined as a sheltered temporal space while being newly subject to commercial interests.

Debates about childhood employed visual representation to make their case, to incite emotion, and to consolidate beliefs. No wonder, then, that in looking back to the milieu from which Levitt emerged in 1935-1940, one discovers that she was far from alone in paying special attention to children visible in the city streets. In those years, the street child became something of a cliché in photographic culture, as I discuss in detail in chapter two.

In order to understand the significance of Levitt's sense of the street child, we need to restore her photographs to their historical specificity by relating her work to the intense production and circulation of images of children in the 1930s and 1940s, when a veritable child mania burst forth in American culture, as a torrent of photographs, paintings, exhibitions, books, movies, and articles made children newly visible as objects of study, ideals of contemplation, and targets of political policy. Attention to children cut across categories of media and style; it involved visual and verbal discourses. In its visual manifestations, child mania involved at least two axes of representation: pictures *of* children and art *by* children. Significantly, these parallel Levitt's two lines of work on the subject. Along both axes, the child functioned as a mutable symbol, mobilized to embody contradictory claims, used to represent both ideals and fears. Images of children presented figures dense with symbolic significance, freighted with utopian as well as dystopian claims, overdetermined by ideology, and proliferating through both "high" and "low" arenas of visual culture. Dealing, as they did, in contradictions, these discourses around

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 236.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.244.

<sup>34</sup> See John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p.227. See also Vicki Goldberg, *Lewis Hine: Children at Work* (New York & Munchen: Prestel, 1994) and Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Mintz, *op. cit.* 252.

the child were marked by heterogeneity, and they produced multiple new ways of looking at children.

For example, following the explosion of mass culture picture magazines that transformed visual culture in the mid-1930s<sup>36</sup>, one stream of child discourse purveyed sentimental, commercial photographs of appealingly innocent, blissfully sheltered children (fig. 10). Framed as the rationale for purchasing products ranging from cameras to war bonds, photographs of children became one of advertising's favored icons of consumer pleasure and domestic prosperity<sup>37</sup>—in an era marked by catastrophic levels of unemployment and bankruptcy followed by the horror of mechanized world war. The children's skin tones invariably conformed to codes of racialist hierarchy (fig. 11); their pastoral placement confirmed the dominance of rural and middle class values (fig. 12).

At the other extreme, the child increasingly became an icon of vulnerability. In the photographs that Dorothea Lange and Ben Shahn made for Roy Stryker's Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Agency visual archive of Depression-era America, for instance, the child recurs as an effective symbol of social breakdown. Following the outbreak of war in Europe, American newspapers began to transmit photographically-illustrated reports of child victims. For example, the innovative daily newspaper *PM*—which would become an important forum for viewing Levitt's photographs, as I discuss in chapter three—ran articles on child émigrés in New York and on the horror of a war in which “Some Children Die, Some Live in Terror.”<sup>38</sup> Innocent casualties were the corporeal sign of a new, and newly horrifying, kind of war. In the outcry over the Spanish Civil War, to offer another example, the child served as a potent symbol.<sup>39</sup> Posters condemning Nazi strafing of civilian villages reproduced photographs of children killed by air raids. The grievous sight of dead children became one of the Spanish Civil War's most volatile signs. In Picasso's *Guernica*, unveiled at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition (fig. 13), the tragedy of a child dead in its mother's arms is expressed through forms that evoke the powerful simplicity of children's drawings. Calling up the tradition of the *pietà*—in the left side, where the mother-child dyad is menaced by the aggressive bull—*Guernica* suggests the slaying of sacred innocence itself. *Guernica* traveled to New York, at Picasso's request, where it was exhibited at the city's Museum of Modern Art in 1939 and would subsequently tour the United States.

If children possessed a new iconicity in the late 1930s, so too did their art. As I discuss below, a host of new initiatives brought children's art firmly into the public eye; institutions like the Federal Art Project proclaimed the cultural value of child art based on its aesthetic interest and its political relevance.

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<sup>36</sup> The major milestone usually cited to mark this trend is LIFE Magazine's 1936 launch date. See, for example, the study of photography in 1930s mass culture in Marianne Fulton and Estelle Jussim, editors, *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, (Boston: Little, Brown in association with the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1988), which remains an important source. A more recent survey of photography in the 1930s, with sections devoted to the decade's magazine culture, is John Raeburn's *A Staggering Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> The noted historian of American childhood, Steven Mintz, shows that commercial interests began marketing to children “as independent consumers” in the 1930s such that “One of the Depression's lasting legacies was nationalizing and commercializing childhood.” See Mintz, Ch. 12 “Coming of Age in the Great Depression,” op. cit. p. 236.

<sup>38</sup> “Some Children Die, Some Live in Terror,” *PM's Weekly*, Sunday October 27, 1940 p16-17 and “Émigré Children Learn the Art of Play in a New World,” *PM*, July 16, 1940, p. 13

<sup>39</sup> Caroline Brothers provides a careful survey of magazine photographs depicting Spanish Civil War casualties, emphasizing the French and British contexts, in *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).



Keeping this broad context in view, then, the remainder of this chapter works to establish the connections between Levitt's initial turn to the child and the widespread cultural interest in children and their art that flourished during her apprentice years. Proceeding chronologically, I trace Levitt's early education as a photographer in the years 1935-1936, outlining the context of her development up to her 1937 participation in the Federal Art Project, when she commenced her breakthrough engagement with child art found in the city streets.

#### **IV. The Prehistory of Levitt's Vision**

Significantly, Levitt herself always insisted that she had no special affection for children. She never claimed any deep-seated *personal* interest in children; on the contrary, more than once she was known to actively refute the assumption that she must just *love* little children by stating, with a perfect poker face, "I hate kids." How then did she come to do such intensive work with the subject? To answer that question requires reexamining the contexts that shaped her vision. The evidence suggests that Levitt recognized and responded to the new iconography of the child that prevailed in the 1930s and was then being emphasized in the institutions with which she was affiliated: the leftist New York Film and Photo League and its sister publication, *New Theatre and Film*, where she found resources to educate her eye; the rise of public art programs, which gave her funding to work on children's drawings; the burgeoning culture of popular magazines and tabloids, where her first pictures were published; and the influx of surrealist ideas into popular America culture. Together, these four cultural sectors provided the matrices Levitt needed for thinking about how and why to photograph the child. These different nodes of production gave her an important set of parameters with which to begin; nevertheless, the important point is ultimately Levitt's transformation of those given parameters. Her work is revered today not because it participated in the child mania of its day, but because it drove a wedge into dominant assumptions about children. Her photographs allow the child its own pensive, polyvalent space. She made visible what the great theorist of play, Johann Huizinga, insists upon in *Homo Ludens*, which, as noted above, appeared in 1938: the fundamental seriousness of play in the making of human culture.

#### **Youth**

The existing biography on Helen Levitt, written by Maria Morris Hambourg for the artist's 1991 exhibition catalogue, begins by stating that "It is unlikely that those who knew Helen Levitt as a girl foresaw that she would become an artist."<sup>40</sup> What Morris Hambourg means, I think, is that Levitt made her mark on American culture with few privileges of gender or class, ethnicity or education to support her ambition. Born in 1913, Levitt grew up in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, "an undistinguished neighborhood," according to the 1939 Federal Writers' Project *Guide to New York City*, "inhabited mainly by Italian and Jewish families."<sup>41</sup> Throughout her life, Levitt retained a plain-spoken manner, and a tendency toward self-deprecation, that owed something to her working-class immigrant roots.

Levitt's father Sam was a Jewish émigré who journeyed from his native Lithuania to America as an adolescent. He got his start in the New World peddling utensils from a mule

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<sup>40</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.45.

<sup>41</sup> WPA *Guide to New York City* op. cit. p. 470.

driven cart,<sup>42</sup> but eventually traded that itinerant life for a successful wholesale knit goods business.<sup>43</sup> In a sense, he enjoyed a modest version of the classic American immigrant success story, though he seems to have never forgotten how difficult upward mobility can be. Whenever Helen or her two brothers asked where he had lived in the old country, he invariably offered them a mysterious, foreign-sounding word, which they could never find on any map. They later discovered it was Yiddish for “nowhere.”<sup>44</sup>

But Levitt was also her mother’s daughter, from whom she inherited a streak of feminist boldness. Born May Kanevsky, Levitt’s mother was the archetypal New Woman, one of the rebellious daughters who revolutionized social and cultural mores in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She changed her last name to the modern-sounding “Kane,” developed a career for herself as a bookkeeper, and rejected Jewish religious tradition because it consigned women to second-class status.<sup>45</sup> In the words of Helen’s younger brother, Bill, “Our mom was not of her generation. She smoked. She played bridge. And she let everybody do what they felt like.”<sup>46</sup>

Taking that permission to do what she liked, Levitt dropped out of high school in 1930, having completed her third year. The unimaginative curriculum offered at New Utrecht High School left her disenchanted with academics: “The only thing fun was the French revolution. Outside of that, everything was boring. They had you memorize dates.”<sup>47</sup> It may have seemed fruitless to memorize historical dates when so many dramatic political events were unfolding in present time: the stock market had crashed in 1929, and Americans struggled with unprecedented economic calamity; the USSR had embarked on its first five-year plan; and the Weimar Republic was under threat from the Nazi party.

Yet those “bitter years”<sup>48</sup> ironically opened up new cultural opportunities for people like Helen Levitt. Political strife and social stress focused public attention on the lives of the “common” people and the “forgotten” classes. In the words of the great American literary critic Alfred Kazin, the 1930s were the “age of the plebes.” Whereas the artists and writers who had made their mark on the 1920s were usually bohemian “rebels from good families,” in the 1930s, new kinds of cultural production and institutional mandates brought support for writers, dancers, artists, and photographers who were the “products of city streets, factories, and farms,” those who came from and choose to represent “the working class, the lower class, the immigrant class, the non-literate class.”<sup>49</sup> Between 1934 and 1940, Helen Levitt would become one of those new

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<sup>42</sup> Author interview with Cassie Levitt Dipppo, 11.22.2009.

<sup>43</sup> Morris Hamberg, op. cit. p.48.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with William Levitt, 11.23.2009.

<sup>45</sup> Author interview with Helen Levitt, 11.28.2007.

<sup>46</sup> Author interview with William Levitt, 11.23.2009.

<sup>47</sup> Author’s interview with Helen Levitt, 2.16.2008.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Steichen, *The Bitter Years: 1935-1941* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962).

<sup>49</sup> Kazin is speaking about writers, but his comments apply equally well to dancers, playwrights, artists, and perhaps most of all to such photographers as Dorothea Lange, Weegee (Arthur Fellig), and Helen Levitt: “Trouble was in the air everyday now, and whatever else you could say about them, the ‘new’ writers looked as if they had been born to trouble—as in fact they had been, for they were usually the products of city streets, factories and farms. More than the age of the ideologue, of the literary revolutionary and the ‘proletarian’ novelist, roles usually created within the Communist movement, the Thirties in literature [and visual culture] were the age of the plebes—of writers from the working class, the lower class, the immigrant class, the non-literate class, from Western farms and mills—those whose struggle was to survive. When you thought of the typical writers of the Twenties, you thought of rebels from ‘good’ families—Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cummings, Wilson, Cowley. What was new about the writers of the Thirties was not so much their angry militancy, which many shared, as their background; writers now came from anywhere...” Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965) p.10-13.

cultural producers, those whom Kazin calls “dizzy and grandiloquent...because they knew that there was no tradition to hold them down.”

Indeed, Levitt tended to describe her first foray into photography as something of a lark: “I thought I’d like to be an artist. In school, we’d sit there out of boredom and draw ladies, but I was not good at it. I thought, ‘I can never be an artist. I can’t draw.’ And then along came photography.”<sup>50</sup>

Photography first came along in its most quotidian form, as a job in the Bronx commercial portrait studio of J. Florian Mitchell, a friend of her mother’s. As an apprentice to Mitchell, Levitt helped him to produce the staples of his trade—portraits of babies and wedding couples, the usual flattering self-representations of the aspiring classes. Her job gave her the beginnings of a photographic education. According to Morris Hambourg, Mitchell was not just a photographic businessman but someone interested in the aesthetics of his craft. He belonged to the Pictorial Photographers of America, and Levitt accompanied him to the organization’s exhibitions, where she encountered examples of photographs framed in the context of art.<sup>51</sup>

But Levitt was soon looking to expand her aesthetic horizons beyond the provincialism of Mitchell’s studio and the old-fashioned aesthetics of pictorialist photography. By 1934, she had begun to consider Mitchell’s studio “slightly ridiculous.”<sup>52</sup> Her own cultural interests had grown more ambitious, more socially aware and more politically engaged as the effects of the Depression lingered, and worsened: “We learned to live on nothing during the Depression.”<sup>53</sup> She had taken to reading *The New Masses* and *The Daily Worker*. She was attending dance classes at Charles Weidman’s school of modern dance, in hopes of a career as a performer, and she was learning about modern literature with the help of her best friend, Clara Schapiro.<sup>54</sup>

Levitt began to think differently about photography around 1934, when she became intrigued by the possibility of the socially engaged photograph. “I somehow saw pictures of people in poverty, and I thought: ‘how interesting. You weren’t just making good pictures; you were doing good.’”<sup>55</sup> More specifically, she saw Walker Evans’s pictures illustrating Carlton Beals’s political exposé, *The Crime of Cuba* (1933);<sup>56</sup> she also discovered the rich and politically informed photographic discourse available at the New York Film and Photo League. Founded in 1930, the League was a vital nucleus for the production, discussion, and exhibition of camera work devoted to the class-conscious documentation of everyday life.

## **On Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Problems in the Early Work**

With its lively community of photography devotees and challenging program of classes, lectures, and film showings,<sup>57</sup> the League was, I am convinced, an important catalyst in Helen

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<sup>50</sup> Author interview with Helen Levitt, 2.26.2008.

<sup>51</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.47.

<sup>52</sup> Author interview with Helen Levitt, 12.5.2007.

<sup>53</sup> Author interview with Helen Levitt, 2.21.2008.

<sup>54</sup> “I learned so much at Charles Weidman. He used to play all sorts of music I had never heard before. French music. I told Clara [Schapiro, her best friend] about it. Clara used to tell me what she was learning [at Brooklyn College], and I used to tell her what I learned at Weidman. They were studying Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, and so I got the book and she told me what they talked about. We were always reading and talking about movies and books.” Author interview with Helen Levitt, 2.26.2008.

<sup>55</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2008.

<sup>56</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

<sup>57</sup> On the complicated history of the League, which began in 1930 as the Workers Film and Photo League, became the Film and Photo League, and in 1936 split off into the Photo League, see Leah Ollman, “The Photo League’s

Levitt's development as a photographer, even though she has been known to disavow membership in the organization. Morris Hambourg reports that Levitt "characteristically did not join the League," but instead "hung around" the group's headquarters and sometimes used their darkroom facilities. Levitt told me something different. She said "In the beginning, I belonged to a club, the Film and Photo League."<sup>58</sup>

If Levitt has at certain moments chosen to publicly distance herself from the League, I suspect that her reasons have everything to do with the scars of McCarthyism. Beginning in the late 1940s, the League was targeted for investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee, which had been formed in 1938.<sup>59</sup> By 1949, Levitt would see her League-affiliated friends Sid Grossman and Ben Maddow named as communists; Maddow was intimidated into naming names.<sup>60</sup> All of which provokes an inevitable uncertainty about Levitt's later comments, her reliability as a narrator of her life, and the issue of her pre- versus post- cold war work. What ideas about photography's social role undergird the work she produced in her early years?

There is insufficient visual evidence to permit us to decide this question with complete confidence, since whatever photographs she may have produced before 1936 seem to have vanished. No work from 1934 or 1935 is reproduced in the catalogue to Levitt's 1991 retrospective exhibition, despite the fact that the biographical essay by Morris Hambourg discusses an early project Levitt undertook at the Photo League.<sup>61</sup> (And the catalogue reproduces only six pictures from 1936, which I will discuss shortly.) When I was interviewing Levitt between 2007 and 2008, she generously allowed me to view the pictures stored in her personal archive (kept in boxes in her apartment), but many lacked dates, and those that had them were usually indicated as "circa..." Indeed, dating is an ongoing problem with cataloguing Levitt's work.

Nevertheless, despite these significant lacunae, I want to propose that 1935 and 1936 were pivotal years in Levitt's nascent vision, for they were years when two fateful events converged: she encountered Henri Cartier-Bresson's work just as the culture unleashed a surge of interest in the children of the working class.

## 1935

From April 23 through May 7 of 1935, the Julian Levy Gallery at 602 Madison Avenue presented the exhibition *Documentary and Anti-Graphic: Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and Alvarez Bravo*. Levitt absorbed the show with a combination of amazement

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Forgotten Past," *History of Photography* 18, 2 (summer 1994), 157 and Fiona M. DeJardin, "The Photo League: Left-Wing Politics and the Popular Press," *History of Photography*, 18, 2 (summer 1994), 159. Valuable histories of the League are also available in Raeburn (2006) op. cit., and Anne Tucker's "Photographic Crossroads: The Photo League," *A Special Supplement to Afterimage* (6 April 1978).

<sup>58</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007. "Presently there is no unified league archive, some issues of [the organization's newsletter] *Photo Notes* are missing from collections of the journal that do exist, and there are no known membership lists," per Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London: 1999. p.19

<sup>59</sup> Bezner, *Ibid.* p.19.

<sup>60</sup> Sandra S. Phillips, correspondence, 3.3.2010.

<sup>61</sup> Morris Hambourg writes that Levitt produced a group of photographs in The Seaman's Institute, which were developed in the League darkroom, but does not reproduce any examples of them. Levitt told me that she discarded the Seaman's Institute pictures long ago.

and excitement.<sup>62</sup> For here were photographs intended not as records, documents, or evidence, but as enigmas, marvels, puzzles, and jocular visual puns. Drawing his inspiration from surrealism, Cartier-Bresson made street photographs that courted chance and willfully repudiated notions of “print quality, fine lighting, story or sentiment, tactile values or abstract aesthetics.”<sup>63</sup> Among those displayed at the Levy gallery was one made in Seville, Spain in 1933 showing boys roughhousing among crumbling architectural ruins. By photographing the scene through a hole in a wall—an interior frame that doubles the photographic frame, forming a plaster *repoussoir*—the picture becomes charged with a sense of voyeurism. Because the children’s play takes place in a space replete with decay, disorder, and danger—the ground is littered with broken stones—it reads as a portent of a regressing civilization.

Cartier-Bresson himself had arrived in New York early in 1935, and would stay for a year.<sup>64</sup> Through her friendships forged at the New York Photo League, Levitt met the French photographer briefly, and once she accompanied him on a photography jaunt to her own stomping grounds of Brooklyn.<sup>65</sup> Later in life, she would look back on her encounter with Cartier-Bresson, both the man and his work, as a transformative experience. In her recollection, his work was the catalyst that gave her a sense of the medium as potentially “limitless.”<sup>66</sup>

As of this writing, we possess only the barest facts about her activities during 1935-1936, most of which are supplied by Morris Hambourg’s careful research. Let me rehearse them. We know that Helen Levitt avidly took in the foreign films being shown and discussed in League circles. We know that at the League, she also forged important friendships with such film and photography aficionados as Sidney Meyers, who was then writing film criticism for *New Theatre* magazine, Ben Maddow, Willard Van Dyke, Leo Hurwitz and others.<sup>67</sup> And we also know that Levitt met Cartier-Bresson through her League friend, Willard Van Dyke, and that the Frenchman’s charisma, brilliance, and accomplishment as a photographer fascinated and inspired her.

Curiously, though, Morris Hambourg tells us that “During 1935, the year that Cartier-Bresson lived in New York, Levitt took no photographs,” and surmises that Levitt “seems to have tried to absorb what the Frenchman’s art represented” during that year. Whatever the reasons behind her decision to stop photographing—did she *really*? Levitt was so cagey about her life history, one can never be sure if she reported her doings candidly—the activities that occupied her attention during 1935 would prove significant, I contend, for the kind of work that she would soon produce. She spent much of the year immersed in leftist theater and film. She ushered at the Civic Repertory Theater on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, “home to the unabashedly left-wing Theatre Union,”<sup>68</sup> and she was avidly learning about avant-garde films, especially the Russian

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<sup>62</sup> “I went to lots of galleries when I was learning to make photographs—including Levy gallery—I’d go to see them all—I was teaching myself—I was very impressed by [Cartier-Bresson’s]. They were wonderful.” Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

<sup>63</sup> From the press release for the Julian Levy Gallery’s 1933 exhibition “Cartier-Bresson and Anti-Graphic Photography,” reprinted in *Documentary and Anti-Graphic: Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and Alvarez Bravo: A Reconstruction of the 1935 Exhibition at the Julian Levy Gallery New York*. Exh. cat. Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Musée de l’Elysée Lausanne (Göttingen, 2004) 15.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1987) p.22.

<sup>65</sup> See Maria Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.48.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (New York, Toronto, and London: Little Brown and Company: Boston, 1994), p.263.

<sup>67</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.48.

<sup>68</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.49.

cinema that was exciting so much attention on the left.<sup>69</sup> Levitt had been a devoted cinemaphile since childhood, when her Saturday afternoons at the neighborhood movie house had been a sacred ritual. But Hollywood productions must have paled besides the formal daring and social purpose of her favorite foreign films: Dzigo Vertvo's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Aerograd*, Nikolai Ekk's *The Road to Life*.

For anyone who wanted to understand the achievements of the great Soviet film-makers, or to keep pace with the temporal and performative arts of theater and dance, there was a necessary resource available in New York in 1935, and one with a decidedly leftist orientation: the magazine *New Theatre*, which covered (as its byline explicitly stated) *Drama, Film, Dance*. There is little doubt in my mind that Levitt knew it and learned from it, or that it has much to tell us about the cultural perspective that shaped her vision. I base that claim partly on strong circumstantial evidence. Levitt's close friends Sidney Meyers and Edna Ocko were both regular contributors to *New Theatre*; he wrote film criticism under the pen name Robert Stebbins, while Ocko (later Meyers), who was a dancer, discussed the latest developments in her art form, covering choreographers ranging from Martha Graham to Mary Wigman. More importantly, *New Theatre* was a forum for viewing the kinds of photographs that mattered to the young Helen Levitt. For example, in its first issue (November 1934), the magazine published a two-page portfolio of twelve photographs by Ben Shahn, laid out in a grid format and captioned "Scenes from the Living Theatre—Sidewalks of New York" (fig. 1.14). They were, according to scholar Laura Katzman, Shahn's "first published photographs of the city,"<sup>70</sup> and they demonstrated Shahn's newfound candid aesthetic, with its emphasis on scenes glimpsed in the flow of life, evincing a quasi-cinematic quality and a deep commitment to the reality of working class experience as played out on the stoop, at the window, and in the street. These aspects of Shahn's pictures would prove to be a "big influence"<sup>71</sup> on Helen Levitt, as would the very conceit of the "Sidewalks of New York" as a "Living Theatre."<sup>72</sup>

Even more pointedly, on page nine of its September 1935 issue, *New Theatre* published a suite of four photographs showing young boys playing games of mock warfare (fig. 1.15). Laid out as a series of inter-related views, with pretend muskets giving way to a scene of fallen "soldiers," aggressively pointing pistols paired against kids issuing taunts from behind a graffiti-covered barricade, they stress through reiteration the ironic conjunction of militaristic violence, fun, and childhood innocence. The photographer and/or editors explicitly link these scenes of play to the specter of fascism by identifying the boys' ostensible German heritage with their militaristic play, captioning the picture thus: "These photographs of children at play were taken on the streets of Yorkville, German American section of New York City..." The children, then, represent a disturbing sign of impending war in a magazine that was passionately against military

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<sup>69</sup> On the rising leftist interest in filmmaking in the 1930s, see William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-1942*. (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1982).

<sup>70</sup> Laura Katzman, "Ben Shahn's New York: Scenes from the Living Theatre," in Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman & Jenna Webster. *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Author's interview with Levitt, 12.4.2007.

<sup>72</sup> The magazine actually printed photographs under the rubric of "The Living Theater" on a semi-regular basis. For example, in April of 1937 the publication—then renamed *New Theatre and Film*—presented four Shahn photographs and a variant of Dorothea Lange's famous *Migrant Mother* as that month's example of "The Living Theatre."

jingoism (The April 1935 issue was designated the “Anti-War Issue”). Intriguingly, the photographer is identified as “Pierre Renne, a young member of the French Film and Photo League who is now residing in this country.” According to Peter Galassi, Henri Cartier-Bresson published photographs in the September 1935 issue of *New Theatre*.<sup>73</sup> Apparently, Pierre Renne is the *nom de camera* of Cartier-Bresson himself.

The question that irresistibly arises—did Helen Levitt see this particular set of images?—cannot be answered definitively. It would be hard to believe that she did not, considering she was “mad about” Henri Cartier-Bresson’s work at the time, knew him through her association with the New York branch of the Film and Photo League, and had close connections through Meyers and Ocko to *New Theatre*. Whether or not Levitt knew this particular incarnation of the street child, she would have been thoroughly aware that the trope was gaining a new currency, because representations of boys playing in the street became a veritable phenomenon between 1935 and 1936, following the popular success and critical acclaim of the new play *Dead End*, written and directed by Pulitzer Prize winning author Sidney Kingsley. The play opened in the fall season of 1935 and generated attention in large part because of its representation of “a young boy who is being driven into ...crime and murder by the cumulative effect of poverty, bad example, and the callousness of the law.”<sup>74</sup> Critics opined that it had “...probably done as much as the stage can toward encompassing the question of crime and its relation to social justice.”<sup>75</sup> The most striking aspect of the play was “...the vivid performance of the child actors who comprise the most dynamic group of youngsters the stage has harbored within our memory.”<sup>76</sup>

Those “dynamic...youngsters” spawned a cult of the *Dead End Kids* that gave the play a pronounced afterlife in film and popular culture. By 1937, it was remade into a Hollywood film, *Dead End*, with Humphrey Bogart playing the doomed gangster, but once again the child actors were the real stars of the show. Its popularity led to six follow-up films released between 1938 and 1939: *Crime School*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, *Angels Wash Their Faces*, *On Dress Parade*.<sup>77</sup> The trope of the *Dead End Kid* had entered the cultural vernacular with a vengeance; between 1936 and 1945, allusions to them sprang up seemingly everywhere. Consider, for example, that an April 12, 1936 article by photography and art critic Elizabeth McCausland, which appeared in *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*—“Fever of the Higher Arts Grips New York Settlement Children”—illustrated the new WPA arts programs for children with a photograph captioned “Juvenile stars of ‘*Dead End*’ watch Gramercy Boys’ club at work.” The staged publicity still, credited “Art Service Project, WPA,” contrives (a bit awkwardly) to show two “juvenile stars,” dressed in suits and ties, observing three youngsters enrolled in WPA art classes at work with chisels, hammers, and blocks of stone. Reference to “children of ‘*Dead End*’” likewise appears in 1937 in *The New Yorker*’s “Onward and Upward with the Arts” column—an instance I will discuss in detail shortly. But perhaps the most striking indication of the play’s afterlife appears in the 1939

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Galassi states in his footnote 39 that “Four [photographs by Cartier-Bresson] appeared in *New Theatre* (New York), 2 (September 1935),” p.9 in *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work*. p.48

<sup>74</sup> John W. Gassner, “The Play’s the Thing,” review in *New Theatre*, December 1935, p.12.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.10

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p.12

<sup>77</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005) p.176. Mintz discusses the “enormous...” popularity of the *Dead End Kids* and their comic counterparts, the *Little Rascals*, pointing out that “Their appeal lay in the kids’ unfeigned spontaneity, their freedom from parental supervision and adult inhibitions and constraints, and their awkward attempts to act like grownups,” *Huck’s Raft*, op. cit. p.249

Federal Art Project's *WPA Guide to New York City*. In a portfolio of notable urban landmarks, the reader encounters a photograph of children—mostly boys in bathing trunks—playing on an East River dock (fig. 1.16). The caption “Dead End Near Sutton Place” does not just cue the viewer to recollect the theatrical play's famous scene of boys swimming in the east river.<sup>78</sup> It serves to confuse the distinction between life and art. Is life imitating art, or vice versa? The realism of photographic representation colludes with the emphatic realism of the play to insist that the image of the Dead End Kid represents the quintessence of working class boyhood. The Dead End Kid had become a dominant synecdoche for urban poverty. The habit of rendering children's street play as the key sign of economic oppression persisted well into August of 1940, when the magazine *PM*—which published Helen Levitt's pictures in 1940 and 1941—ran its investigative article “Hoboken: Story of a Sick City.” The newspaper represented children's street play as the ultimate index of the city's economic decline: “In Hoboken, kids jam the gutters and clamber through abandoned houses...” A photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of children playing was framed by a caption that worried: “These are Hoboken's Children: Are They All ‘Dead End’ Kids?”

When you have been in Hoboken a week the thing that you think the most about is the streams of kids who crowd the streets. Many of them are doing homework right now; most of them aren't sure what they will do next. Trapped in a city that is sick, vaguely feeling that they have no place to go, what do they really think about? Suppose they were told, as they may be, that democracy is in danger? Will they look around and say ‘huh’? Or will Hoboken be saved by a long-threatened revolt of “of the bankers and the poor”? Nobody in Hoboken knows the answer now.<sup>79</sup>

## 1936

In 1936, Levitt bought herself a used Leica camera (fig. 17). It was a decisive move. In part, choosing the Leica meant affirming her allegiance to Cartier-Bresson's work, as it was his preferred instrument. It also signaled a readiness to take new kinds of risks. For the “miniature camera,” as hand-held cameras were called, lacked the associations of serious craftsmanship and professionalism that belonged to larger format cameras. In the 1920s ambitious American photographers had scoffed at the “mini cam” as a mere “child's toy.”<sup>80</sup> By the 1930s, the child's toy was beginning to receive grudging respect. Ben Shahn and Walker Evans, for example, together explored the potential of the Leica around 1932.<sup>81</sup> Their exciting work helped remove

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<sup>78</sup> One of the most striking and commented upon features of the play was its set, which included a “dock which projects into the orchestra” to enable the boy actors to appear to be constantly diving in and climbing out of the east river. See for example Gassner, *op. cit.* p.12.

<sup>79</sup> James Wechsler and Margaret Bourke-White, “News in Pictures,” *PM*, August 12, 1940. Another notable instance of the trope of the Dead End Kid appears in Weegee's *Naked City* of 1945, in which his photograph of a crowd of crime-scene bystanders, many of whom are children, is captioned: “...neighborhood dead-end kids enjoyed the show when a small-time racketeer was shot and killed.” Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), p.86.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Galassi, “Rude and Crude: Cartier-Bresson at Julian Levy Gallery,” in *Documentary and Anti-Graphic: Photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and Alvarez Bravo* (2004), p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> Laura Katzman, “Ben Shahn's New York: Scenes from the Living Theater” in Katzman, Deborah Martin Kao, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*. Exh. cat. Harvard University Art Museums (Cambridge, New Haven, and London, 2000) p. 12.



the stigma of the miniature camera user as “the lowest form of photographic life...amateurs [who] snap away at everything they see.”<sup>82</sup>

If using a mini-cam remained a provocative, even edgy choice—it implied one valued the excitement of visual discovery over the claims of controlled artistry—it also conferred distinct advantages. With its rolled 35 millimeter film capable of split-second exposure time, the Leica was geared toward capturing faster-moving action than bulkier cameras. It would give Levitt an inconspicuousness and nimbleness on the street that would prove crucial to her emerging aesthetic. Like Ben Shahn, she soon learned to outfit her Leica with a right-angle viewfinder, a decoy eyepiece that makes the photographer appear to be looking away from the true subject. The viewfinder offered a powerful tool for glimpsing the richness of others’ private worlds without disturbing their reveries.<sup>83</sup>

The discovery of Cartier-Bresson and the decision to work with the Leica were both important steps in Levitt’s self-formation as a photographer. Yet neither was sufficient to crystallize her emergent vision. Indeed, Levitt’s first Leica pictures are hesitant and unrealized, for she had not yet discovered her sense of the reciprocity between subject and style.

Most of the extant early pictures focus on adults, who lean, stand, stride, sit, or collapse in postures of dejection (fig. 1.18 – 1.21). Their mood is ominous: bodies slump; the fierce light blinds and seems to blight the woman covering her eyes; the isolated men are marooned in vast empty space. An echo of Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Nostalgia of the Infinite* (1912-13, fig. 1.22) exists in figure 1.22; the Museum of Modern Art had just purchased the painting in 1936 and included it in the hugely popular survey exhibition of that winter, *Dada, Surrealism, and Fantastic Art*. Levitt owned the exhibition catalogue all her life and almost surely attended the 1936 exhibit—she was then eagerly searching out museums and galleries to educate her eye, and Giorgio de Chirico counted among her favorite finds. The painting may well have been lurking in the back of her mind when she composed the photograph, for she absorbs, in an ostensibly “documentary” photograph, de Chirico’s conceit of a vast menacing tower looming over shrunken, shadowy figures. We see Levitt beginning to align her photographic vision with lessons appropriated from other art forms, a habit that would grow to shape her way of working.

In these early pictures of adults, Levitt is clearly paying homage to Evans’s Cuba work. She takes a cue from his focus on sleeping, immobilized, or dejected figures reduced to the barest ground of existence—literally and figuratively brought low by oppression and deprivation, as in his well-known *Family* (fig. 1.23), with its hopeless mother vainly attempting to shelter her half-naked children in an inhospitable doorway.

There is also a (previously unpublished) photograph of a child from Levitt’s personal archive that may allude to Evans’s *Family* (fig. 24). It depicts a young boy slumped in the traditional posture of melancholy (he is reminiscent of both Dürer and Van Gogh’s version of the theme). Like Evans’s abandoned, fatherless *Family*, the boy appears to retreat abjectly into the recessed space of a doorway. The picture is not dated, but based on the visual evidence—specifically, the organization of the picture around an isolated and dejected human presence—I would place it in 1936, the year when Levitt was learning what she could make her Leica do, and

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<sup>82</sup> Agha, M.F. “The Big Miniature Man,” introduction on exhibition announcement for *Remie Lhose: Exhibitions of Photographs, February 13 to March 3, 1934*, at the Julian Levy Gallery, James Thrall Soby papers 1.29.11, the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

<sup>83</sup> Sandra S. Phillips speaks eloquently about Levitt’s sense of discretion and privacy in Morris Hambourg and Phillips, *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco, 1991) p.15.

working to apply the lessons she had understood from Evans: that the effects of political strife can be imaged in terms of the specific burdens borne by individual bodies.

The other two tentative, early views of children available from 1936 are more ambiguous, their mood harder to identify. Who, for example, are the girls in figure 1.25; where are they located; and what are they doing? The picture fails to give clear answers to those questions, partly because from a technical standpoint, the focus is blurred. Yet the pictures' "unsatisfactory" quality is "not just because it was out of focus."<sup>84</sup> Even though the title "Central Park, New York" attempts to impart information about locale, and the sartorial details—flouncy floral dresses, long dark braided hair, big hoop earrings—would have been legible to 1930s New York viewers as ethnographic features of "exotic" Gypsy life, the photograph itself has nothing particular to tell us about its subjects. Levitt has not yet zeroed in on the significance of children's play, nor has she crystallized the insight that would become one of her abiding photographic principles: that specificity of gesture reveals the significance of bodies in action, and that the photograph comes to life when it seizes an action in mid-swing so as to suggest the dynamism of movement which the still camera usually leaves out. Levitt needed an opportunity to develop her own ideas about photography, children, and the representation of the human body. The opportunity came in 1937, when she applied for and received a coveted position on the payroll of the New York City branch of the Federal Art Project.<sup>85</sup> It provided the final step in her self-styled photographic apprenticeship.

### 1937: Children's Art in New York

There currently reside in the National Archives, RG 69-ANP (69.11) Boxes 1 and 2, two folders stuffed full of photographs—159 in all—documenting chalk drawings and graffiti scrawled on New York streets by anonymous city children. This singular collection represents the physical traces of Helen Levitt's 1937 participation in the Federal Art Project—the crucial turning point in her career. It was not just that being on the FAP payroll gave her a taste of professional validation in the form of regular financial support.<sup>86</sup> More than that, it prompted her to study children and their art-making in depth at a time when multiple institutions asserted the new relevance of child art to a thoroughly politicized culture.

Morris Hambourg sums up the photographer's enrollment in the FAP with this brief explanation: "Walking to a school in East Harlem, where she taught children art under a Federal Art Project program briefly in 1937, Levitt began studying and saving the best of the children's chalk drawings she found along the way."<sup>87</sup> This is correct, but it omits the important fact that

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<sup>84</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.50

<sup>85</sup> The Federal Art Project belonged to a cluster of new government-funded arts programs that President Roosevelt had authorized beginning in 1934, when he heeded artists' urgings and included cultural projects within his broader New Deal initiatives. The very idea of publicly funded programs for the arts was unprecedented in American culture; not surprisingly, Roosevelt's political opposition attacked them as "boondoggles." Despite their political contentiousness, the programs were ambitious and wide-ranging. They included projects covering three categories of production: the Fine Arts (murals, sculpture, easel painting, and graphics), Practical Arts (which included photography), and Educational Programs. Within the latter there was a special emphasis on exhibiting and supporting children's art-making. See Francis V. O'Connor, ed. *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*. (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973) and Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

<sup>86</sup> On professionalism and women artists, see Melissa Dabakis "Feminist Interventions: Some Thoughts on Recent Scholarship about Women Artists," *American Art* 18 (Spring 2004).

<sup>87</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.52.

Levitt's decision to collect children's chalk drawings belonged to a wider interest in children's art—one that the Federal Art Project was instrumental in fomenting.

Recall that in 1936, the child actors from the play *Dead End* had posed for a WPA art project publicity still, which was printed in Massachusetts's *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican* in the context of the article "Fever of the Higher Arts Grips New York Settlement Children." The author of the article, Elizabeth McCausland, who was then a member of the FAP Department of Information,<sup>88</sup> used her column to explain to the general public that the FAP Department of Art Teaching, headed by Frances M. Pollack,<sup>89</sup> made possible the enrollment of "Some 15,000 Boys and Girls in 200 Social Centers Expressing Themselves in Classes Conducted as Federal Art Project—From East Side, West Side, South End and Harlem They Flock to Paint, Draw, Sculpt and Chisel."<sup>90</sup> McCausland's article illuminates what has otherwise mostly been lost to history: that along with the specific programs designated for Murals, the Index of American Design, Exhibitions, Posters, Easel (painting), and Graphic Arts, the FAP devoted a substantial portion of its resources to art programs for children, and it exhibited children's art prominently<sup>91</sup>. As McCausland tells it, the art programs for children fed a psychological need and brought an unexpected breath of European modernism to the American city:

Dick, aged 11, paints away diligently. In nearby rooms his peers, small boys of the same age, are playing ping-pong with loud shouts of enthusiasm, or outside in the city streets they are pitching a home-made baseball back and forth. But Dick is educating himself the way his growing psyche and body requires at the moment; he is passing through a stage of emotional unfolding when he needs beauty. So he paints away. To be sure, his skyline is a vivid magenta, which may strike the orthodox as an unusual color for the distant horizon. But then his apple trees in the foreground are delicately drawn in with neat brush-strokes, as if an adolescent Henri Rousseau had come to paint on East 16<sup>th</sup> Street.

McCausland's article goes on to argue for the value of the FAP's art teaching on a number of grounds. First, the "methods of progressive education" on offer in the programs, being "entirely divorced from dogmatic academic teaching," are meant to secure "in the next generation better artists and a better audience for artists." As in Yeats's poem *Among Schoolchildren*, these

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<sup>88</sup> "List of Departments and Heads, U.S. Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project, 6 East 39<sup>th</sup> Street, N.Y.C. August 17, 1936." Typescript in registrar file for exhibition #52, *New Horizons in American Art*, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth McCausland, "Fever of the Higher Arts Grips New York Settlement Children." *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, *Springfield, Mass.* April 12, 1936, p. 4E.

<sup>91</sup> See Holger Cahill's discussion of child art programs in his essay for the 1936 exhibition catalogue *New Horizons in American Art*, in which he argues that "Teaching and Children's Work" count among the most important aspects of the new government funded arts program: "In New York City and its vicinity fifty thousand children and adults are being reached weekly through the teaching force of the Federal Art Project...A widening arc of social influence has been created by the classes for under-privileged children, taking them off the street and providing fresh and natural outlets for expression. One school superintendent has stated a typical conclusion, saying that these classes 'have done more to stabilize the schools in this city during a difficult period than any other single agency.' op. cit. p.23.

children learn “In the best modern way.”<sup>92</sup> Second, “to provide children with healthy creative activities” purportedly results in “crime prevention.” Third, the art classes are deemed valuable “for psychiatric and therapeutic reasons.” Perhaps most importantly, at least in McCausland’s eyes—and for the direction that Levitt’s work would take—among the most significant aspects of these children’s art programs were the:

...numerous exhibitions [of FAP child art] throughout the metropolis [that] have acquainted large number of people with the fact that not only the sons and daughters of rich men and the intelligentsia are genuine little primitives, but also the Irish, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Philippine boys and girls of the East Side, the Greek, Syrian, Puerto Rican, Spanish, Portuguese boys and girls of the lower West Side, and the Negro boys and girls of Harlem.

The Federal Art Project, then, made a point of investing political and cultural capital in children’s art through exhibitions, articles, and classes. And partly through its efforts, by 1936, children’s art could be understood through the lens of popularized psychology and as a solution to the woes of political and economic inequality. It could be tied to the theatrical spectacle of *Dead End*, in order to invoke the “delinquent” as a cultural type, and it could be framed as a wholesome activity that would keep rambunctious children off the streets. It could be seen in exhibits (“Last month children’s work was shown at the Federal Art Projects gallery on East 38<sup>th</sup> Street”) and discussed in newspaper articles. Most significantly, it could be claimed to transcend the barriers of class and race.

If McCausland worked to build an argument on the value of retaining FAP art classes for children, in turn children’s art was capable of providing an argument for the FAP itself. At least one critic, upon reviewing the *New Horizons in American Art* survey of Federal Art Project works that originated at New York’s MOMA and traveled to Washington’s National Gallery, could declare that “In this first exposition of the WPA Federal Art Project, it is undoubtedly the children’s works that occupy the most interesting place.”<sup>93</sup> Sibella Skidesky, reviewing the exhibition for *The Washington Post*, judged most of the work assembled to represent a year’s worth of FAP production a resounding failure: “The adult section does not hold any works of real merit,” she asserted, blaming the repeatedly disappointing results on “soft technique,” “extraordinary dullness,” and all around “mediocr[ity].” In contrast, Skidelsky wrote, “The children’s section is the really outstanding part of the whole exhibit.”

Why? What was it that the children’s art could offer that the adults could not? We could turn to Skidelsky’s words for a provisional answer. Her scattered impressions seem to hinge on a historical-aesthetic rupture. She describes adults who are attempting—but failing—to conceptualize their work in terms of Renaissance perspective and academic illusionism, such that one painting is “surprisingly an imitation of Florentine designs” and another is “a transportation of Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Saint Anna and the Virgin Mary’ from the Louvre.” In contrast, the children are innate modernists (not surprising, considering modernists like Klee, Matisse,

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<sup>92</sup> In the context of the FAP art classes, the “best modern way” was understood according to the principles of John Dewey.

<sup>93</sup> Sibilla Skidelsky, “Children Best Their Elders in Federal Project Art on Exhibit at National Gallery: More Originality Shown with Better Composition: First Display of FAP Current This Week Proves a Triumph for Youngsters with Grown-ups Failing to Offer Any Work of Real Merit,” *The Washington Post*, Sunday, June 14, 1936, p.4–5.

Kandinsky, and Picasso studied children's art), such that "Marian Kerr, age 10, produces a 'Girl with Yellow Hair,' all in modernistic blue pencil, quite of French inspiration." The children's sense of design and color turns out to have more power than the "soft" realism of the adults. A boy works with "perfectly delightful...naiveness" balanced with a sense of observation that is "very true to reality." But even more powerfully, the children "possess more originality and more ability in composition."

### ***"Genuine little primitives"***

*If we would return to a more healthy condition we must even be as little children or savages.*" Owen Jones, *Grammar of Ornament*, quoted by Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, 1938

What makes a child's drawing a compelling object of regard for an adult viewer? There is a rich history to this question, one that antedates and laid the groundwork for Levitt's 1937 decision to document child art.

The history of interest in child art is inseparable from those epochal social changes that go by the baffling term "modernity," and which include a wholesale refashioning of childhood's meanings and mores. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists and thinkers, with few exceptions, were quick to dismiss children's art as the inept scribbling of immature, uncivilized creatures. Historians of childhood, starting with Phillipe Ariès's oft-cited 1962 *Centuries of Childhood*, draw a firm line between views of children that prevailed in medieval to early modern society versus the paradigm shift embodied in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theories of children's nature and education. With his "romantic stance toward childhood,"<sup>94</sup> Rousseau promulgated the theory that nature in its inherent wisdom had designated the time before puberty as a wholly irrational and asocial phase of being, qualitatively different from adult experience.<sup>95</sup> Such concepts helped to construct the romantic image of the Wordsworthian child, the pure innocent who enters society "trailing clouds of glory."<sup>96</sup>

Once children had been imagined as fundamentally other in their natural innocence, childhood increasingly came to be "protected, studied, and pondered by parents, moralists, and professionals of various kinds."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the ascension of evolutionary models of human origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to an insistent analogizing of the child mind to the mentalities of non-industrialized societies. Following from Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, it became common to assume that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," that the child is a living embodiment of the pre-modern past. So the English psychologist James Sully could in his 1896 *Studies of Childhood* declare that "As we all know, the lowest races of mankind stand in close proximity to the animal world. The same is true of the infant of civilized races." The hierarchal model of racialist politics meant that the (racially privileged) child was understood as the living link between the low and the high, the past and the present, the "primitive" and the "civilized." Such habits of thought made the child a subject of intense research interest: "It is hardly too

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<sup>94</sup> Jo Alice Leeds. "The History of Attitudes Toward Children's Art." *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, 1989, 30(2), p.94.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p.94.

<sup>96</sup> Rousseau's reverence for childhood as an ideal state of nature did not extend to children's drawings, according to Werner Hoffman, "The Art of Unlearning" in Jonathan Fineberg, *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998) p.5

<sup>97</sup> Leeds, op. cit. p.95.

much to say that [the child] has become one of the most eloquent of nature's phenomena, telling us at once of our affinity to the animal world and of the forces by which our race has, little by little, lifted itself to so exalted a position above that world."<sup>98</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two lines of thinking led to increasing attention to, and appreciation of, child art: the emergence of psychology as a scientific field of inquiry and the development of avant-garde art movements that increasingly sought out inspiration from so-called primitive cultures, as colonialism and the emergence of ethnographic museums prepared the ground for an interest in non-European cultures.<sup>99</sup> Psychologists treated child art as illuminating evidence of psychological development, while artists and aesthetic theorists began to formulate new terms of appreciation for children's art in relation to emerging artistic codes.

One of the earliest writers to celebrate children's art for its own characteristics was the Swiss artist and educator Rodolphe Töpffer, in essays written between 1827 and 1843 for Swiss newspapers and collected in his posthumous volume *Reflexions et Menus Propos d'un Peintre Genevois*. Töpffer anticipated the kind of praise that child art would increasingly receive from avant-garde artists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

I have seen, and you also, that most of these [children's] works, all wrong and messily drawn as they are, still vividly reflect, besides imitative intention, an intention of thought, in such a way that the thought is all the more evident because of the graphic ignorance of the designer. Although we only see parts which are hardly recognizable, considered one by one: a surprising face, a frame badly built and two sticks for legs, we understand, nevertheless, the signs of vitality, the suggestion of expression, the symptoms of order and unity, signs above all of a creative freedom which prevails far above servitude to imitation in works of art. It is strange that from this first and informal degree of art going on in the street we meet these two elements, already associated but distinct, one as a means and the other as a goal; the element of imitation and the element of creative conception that find themselves combined in the same way in art of the highest perfection.<sup>100</sup>

According to art historian Meyer Schapiro, Töpffer was remarkably prescient in his readiness to admire children's "signs of vitality" and "intention of thought" decades before most artists and aesthetic theorists would do so. To back up that claim, Schapiro contrasts Töpffer's pioneering appreciation to "the attitude of Baudelaire":

No French writer of the nineteenth century had written with more passion of the child as the prototype of the painter and poet of genius. Yet the art of the child or the savage has no interest for him; it is clumsy, imperfect, the result of a struggle between the idea and the hand.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, quoted in Leeds, *Ibid.* p.95.

<sup>99</sup> Robert J. Goldwater explains that the 19<sup>th</sup> century emergence of ethnological museums provided a repository of objects that generated an interest in 'primitive' culture, contrasting the 1875-1900 tendency to display foreign objects as "curiosities" to the shift to framing them as art by the 1920s in *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, (New York and London, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1938). See also Fineberg, *Discovering Child Art*, op. cit.

<sup>100</sup> Rodolphe Töpffer. *Reflexions et menus propos d'un peintre genevois*. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1907) p. 259. Quoted in Leeds, op. cit. p.98.

<sup>101</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "Courbet and popular imagery." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Volume 4, (1941), p.180.

The “vitality” and “intention” that Töpffer perceived in child art would not be generally recognized until the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>. An important transitional voice appearing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century belonged to Corrado Ricci, whose *L’arte de Bambini* of 1887 counts as one of the crucial early efforts to think systematically and affectionately about children’s art from the point of view of the child, to ask: “When, then, is the rule that guides the art of children?” He set out to answer his question by making an empathetic leap into the child’s own approach to the task of two dimensional representation, concluding that:

Children describe the man and things instead of rendering them artistically. They try to reproduce them in their literal completeness, and not with a view to optical results. In short, they make with signs the same sort of description that they would make with words. They know that a man has two legs, and they draw him with both even when they must draw the man in a position that would show only one, or none at all. With few exceptions, all of those who have made two or more men in a boat, have drawn them from head to foot, without thinking that the side of the boat hides a great part of the body. They reason, or perhaps fail to reason, in this way: “The man in the boat is all there, and if he is whole, why should we draw only half of him”?<sup>102</sup>

Ricci’s theorizing marks a significant juncture, for he is able to affirm the logic of the child’s formal decisions, to validate the reasons a child might proceed by cataloguing the conceptual elements that constitute a body, rather than conforming to the contingent optical appearance of a given body as it is situated in time and space from a single point of view. A decade or so later, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>, child art would not only assume a newly exalted position in the aesthetic pantheon of many avant-garde artists, it would also be deemed suitable for collection and exhibition in the spaces of high art. Consider these landmarks: in 1898, the Hamburg Kunsthalle held *Das Kind als Künstler*, inaugurating the soon-to-be widespread habit of conjoining children’s art and ethnographic artifacts to argue for their supposed similarity in operating outside of European rationality; in 1908, the Vienna Kunstschau would include children’s drawings, and in 1909 Matisse would organize a *Salon des enfants* to display work by his own children and his friends.<sup>103</sup>

These historical transformations meant that by 1910 or so (that year human nature changed, according to Virginia Woolf), artists could now declare children’s art to be superior to that of trained adult artists. In 1912—the moment when that shattering event known as cubism was in full swing—Kandinsky could write that “There is an unconscious, enormous power in the child...which places the child’s work on the same level as that of the adult (and often on a much higher one!).”<sup>104</sup> Likewise, Paul Klee asserted that children’s art was one means by which artists might recover a lost original vitality:

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<sup>102</sup> Corrado Ricci, *L’arte de bambini*. (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1887). Translated and quoted in Leeds, op. cit. p.11-12.

<sup>103</sup> Jonathen Fineberg, ed. *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), p.215-216.

<sup>104</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” published in *Der Blaue Rieter* in 1912 and quoted in Leeds, op. cit. p.100.

For there are still primordial origins of art, as you would rather find them in the ethnographic museum or at home in the nursery. Don't laugh reader! Children can do it too and there is wisdom in the fact. The more helpless they are, the more instructive their examples, and already at an early stage one has to save them from corruption.<sup>105</sup>

The revaluation of child art that crested in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>106</sup> meant that by Levitt's time, there existed an established discourse on its intrinsic aesthetic and anthropological merit. Admiration for children's art was supported, and reinforced, by the progressive education principles that gained authority in the United States in the writings of Franz Cicek, John Dewey, Viktor Lowenfeld and others.<sup>107</sup> We have already heard an echo of those progressive ideas in Elizabeth McCausland's pleased report that, in the Federal Art Project, the belief prevails that:

...every child has a source of original creative energy which, if allowed to develop spontaneously along natural lines, will produce something far more important than the stiff, formal, hackneyed kind of art resulting from too much supervision and too many admonitions to copy the apple or the plaster cast.<sup>108</sup>

The autonomous value of child art was so widely accepted by the 1930s that exhibitions on the theme were becoming commonplace; appreciation had moved beyond the esoteric concerns of avant-garde artists into the general public's field of view. Indeed, by 1938, such exhibitions had become so popular that at least one critic felt compelled to complain about them. In the October 1938 issue of *Art Digest*, editor Peyton Boswell bemoaned the fact that

...in New York and elsewhere...[there is] an undue and mistaken emphasis being placed on child art...by museums (especially the Museum of Modern Art) and other public organizations whose walls should be dedicated to the artist who struggled for years to perfect the vehicle for his voice. Public 'festivals' and exhibitions devoted to the "Child in Art" are profound misdirections of kindness at the expense of humans too young to defend themselves.<sup>109</sup>

Note that MOMA is the primary target of Boswell's ire. From April 4 – April 22, 1938, the institution hosted an exhibition titled *Children's Work*.<sup>110</sup> In pointing his finger at "other public organizations" as well, Boswell is likely thinking of the Federal Art Project, which sponsored

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<sup>105</sup> As quoted in Werner Hoffman, "The Art of Unlearning," op. cit. p.12–13.

<sup>106</sup> Leeds, pp. 99–101.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p.101.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth McCausland. "Fever of the Arts Grips New York Settlement Children," op. cit. p.4E

<sup>109</sup> Peyton Boswell, "Spare the Child," *Art Digest*, October, 1938, page 3.

<sup>110</sup> Despite Boswell's complaints, MOMA went full bore ahead with an amazing number of child art exhibitions between 1938 and 1943. Consider the following: *Children's Work*, April 4 – April 22, 1938; *Creative Growth, Childhood to Maturity* November 1939 – January 1940; *Children of England Paint*; November 6 – November 30, 1941; *Children's Painting and the War*, November 1942 – December 1942; *Children's Festival of Modern Art*, March 11 – May 10, 1942; *Salvage Posters by New York High School Students*, June 24 – September 3, 1942; *Young Negro Art*, October – November 1943; *Understanding the Child through Art*, February – April 1944; *Soviet Children's Art*, September – November 1944; *Chinese Children's War Pictures*, April – May 1944, etc. etc. The phenomenon reaches its apex in the war years, holds steady in the late 1940s and early 1950s, then begins to die out in the 1960s, disappearing altogether after 1962.



periodic exhibitions of children's art beginning in 1936<sup>111</sup> and which ran a "Children's Federal Art Gallery" in Washington, D.C.<sup>112</sup>

But other kinds of institutions were also displaying, studying, and celebrating children's art. For example, the Spanish Child Welfare Association, a charitable relief organization working to ameliorate the effects of the Spanish Civil War, used children's art to mobilize anti-war convictions and to raise funds on behalf of child war victims. The organization arranged to collect art by Spanish children, exhibit it at museums and department stores during 1938 and 1939, and to publish a catalogue of selected drawings under the title, *They Still Draw Pictures!* The exhibit was shown at the Harvard College Library, where curator Philip Hofer selected for purchase the child's drawing "Salvaging Pictures of the Art Museum" as one of "about twelve pictures for Harvard Library;"<sup>113</sup> at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art; The Cleveland Museum of Art; Lord & Taylor department store;<sup>114</sup> and numerous other venues.

The publication of *They Still Draw Pictures!* is of more than passing interest, for it opens onto the particular intentions and beliefs that informed the circulation, reception, and interpretation of child art in American culture circa 1938. Let me turn, then, to the catalogue essay written by Aldous Huxley, which asks its readers to hold divergent ideas in mind when examining the children's drawings collected in its spiral-bound pages.

First, he instructs, we must understand what the book presents to its reader/viewers. It is a collection of children's art, yes, but more precisely a "collection of drawings by little boys and girls who have lived through a modern war."<sup>115</sup> Huxley proposes that we ought to interpret them through two different lenses: one of aesthetic appreciation, and another of sociological concern. Reading in this bifurcated way, Huxley argues that the pictures reveal an acute contradiction. On the one hand, they offer pleasure, for they are abundant in beauty, creativity, and inventiveness, suggesting that the resources of the imagination are spread prodigiously among all children:

From an aesthetic and psychological point of view, the most startling thing about a collection of this kind is the fact that, when they are left to themselves, most children display astonishing artistic talents. (When they are interfered with and given 'lessons in art,' they display little beyond docility and a chameleon-like power to imitate whatever models are set up for their admiration.) One can put the matter arithmetically and say that, up to the age of fourteen or thereabouts, at least fifty per cent of children are little

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<sup>111</sup> Fineberg's timeline in *Discovering Child Art* lists periodic exhibits of children's art sponsored by the FAP from 1936-1938, op. cit. p. 232

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Russell C. Parr, Regional Advisor of the Federal Art Project, to Agnes B. Meyer, June 15, 1938, folder "Exhibitions" from the archives of The Spanish Child Welfare Association, New York Public Library, box 1.

<sup>113</sup> Records of the Spanish Child Welfare Association, New York Public Library Special Collections, Box 2, folder labeled "Harvard College Library."

<sup>114</sup> The press release for the Lord & Taylor exhibition reads: "Patrons of Lord & Taylor will be afforded the first opportunity in this country to view child art, reflecting first hand impressions of modern warfare, at an exhibition of Spanish children's drawings...Collected from children's art classes in cities and children's colonies in Spain, the drawings show not only the impact which war has made on children, but also the influence of such diverse factors as traditional Spanish art and American movies. Subjects range from the hard realism of war scenes to the child fantasy of Mickey Mouse and Buffalo Bill. All the drawings indicate the emotional and intellectual response of the child to the multiple pressures that crowded him in a war-torn country that is still a land of art." Folder labeled "Exhibit Children's Drawings at Lord & Taylor's." *loc. cit.*

<sup>115</sup> Aldous Huxley, *They Still Draw Pictures! A Collection of Sixty Drawings Made by Spanish Children During the War*. (New York: The Spanish Child Welfare Association of America for the American Friends Service Committee, 1938).

geniuses in the field of pictorial art. After that, the ratio declines with enormous and accelerating rapidity until, by the time the children have become men and women, the proportion of geniuses is about one in a million.

To grow up, in this account, is to wither; progress is an illusion and a myth—a conviction that dovetails with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century modern artists' interest in child art. Huxley explicitly links that pessimism about progress to society itself. For the other lens that we must wield in looking at the children's art, he argues, is that of the historian and sociologist:

If we look at them with the eyes of historians and sociologists, we shall be struck at once by a horribly significant fact: *the greater number of these drawings contain representations of airplanes.* [emphasis in the original] To the little boys and girls of Spain, the symbol of contemporary civilization, the one overwhelmingly significant fact in the world today is the military plane...

The children's drawings, then, can be interpreted formally, appreciated for such qualities as their "sure...sense of colour," a "remarkable capacity for decorative invention," "curious and original pattern," "power of psychological and dramatic expression." But they are more than aesthetic objects; they are "symptoms of our contemporary civilization." In other words, children's drawings function as a kind of indexical sign. Made not by artistic training but by inner drives, the drawing is a material trace of a psychological disposition. It indexes the "horribly" new reality of mechanized war aimed not simply at the civilian but at the child.

### ***What Goes On In the Minds of New York Children: Levitt's collection of child art***

Whereas Huxley's Spanish children drew the horrible reality of the airplane as the symbol of mechanized total war, Helen Levitt's collection of wall and sidewalk drawings provided insight into what goes on in the minds of New York children—to invoke the headline introducing her photographs of children's street drawings for the readers of *PM*, in their March 2, 1941 issue.<sup>116</sup> By proposing that the drawings are transcripts of children's inner fantasy worlds, the editors reaffirm the contemporary conviction that children's drawings might be interpreted through a psycho-social lens, as "symptoms of our contemporary civilization."

And what exactly did Levitt point to as the material that occupied "the Minds of New York Children"? When I asked Helen Levitt why she had devoted two years to collecting children's art in the streets, she answered, "I thought they should be preserved." Never a verbose person ("I'm no theorist," she would say when pressed to explain her work), she declined to elaborate, leaving open the corollary question: What exactly seemed worth preserving? An answer requires looking closely at the act of collecting she undertook between 1937 and 1938.

Of the 159 photographs deposited at the National Archive,<sup>117</sup> the greatest number—by far—consist of figural representations. More than half (upwards of seventy) are versions of the

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<sup>116</sup> "Photography: Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes On in the Minds of New York Children," *PM's Weekly*, March 2, 1941. p.48–49.

<sup>117</sup> These 159 do not constitute the whole of Levitt's work with children's chalk drawings. The visual evidence demonstrates that she continued to photograph children's chalk drawings beyond 1937; for example, the famous "Press Button to Secret Passage" is not in the National Archive collection and likely dates to 1938 or later. I am focusing here on the National Archive collection because we can be relatively confident that they all belong to 1937 or 1938.

human body, ranging from the most rudimentary “tadpole” figures (fig. 1.27) to a carefully rendered portrait of a woman in a polka-dotted dress smoking a cigarette (fig. 1.28). Through the appropriative power of camera technology, Levitt assembled an archive of children’s chalk drawings that demonstrates the sheer variety of ways that youngsters can contrive chalk marks on an asphalt ground into a representation of the human body. No other theme comes close to the human figure in holding the interest of the children and/or the photographer. Animals do make an appearance, including a charmingly rotund elephant, but only four times. Fourteen of the documented drawings consist of houses, which are often embellished with pastoral attributes such as trees and flowers—one is even labeled “the contry” [sic] (the city child’s fantasy of a rural utopia). Vehicles of transportation are the second most populous group, with twenty-two examples of boats (steamships, sailboats, and canoes), a horse-drawn laundry cart, as well as the airplanes that menaced Huxley’s Spanish children and other signs of war, including a possible submarine and a parachute.

But the great preoccupation remains the body, for the mysteries of physicality are registered not only through iconic representations of the body but also through textual messages that pivot around the volatility of secret drives and shameful affect. Lust is declared in chalk on a brick wall: “I love you Newton by Mere Scoot.” “I love Johnny truly. AND HOW.” Those who incite dislike are said to stink (“Pancho stinks”). Melodramatic news of the latest gossip is offered in abbreviated form: “Flash: Teresa Rondino loves Eddie Huber. But he hates her. She is heart broken” (fig. 1.29). The desperate tales of love are equaled only by hatefulness, as evidenced in the contemptuous/hilarious would-be performative: “Whoever reads this is a dop[e].”

Cumulatively, this archive of chalk graffiti punctures a hole in the concept of the child as a pure innocent. Even the material with which the sidewalk drawings are made resonates with insolence and insouciance. Levitt recalled that the children used to get the chalk by swiping it from their school classrooms, behind the backs of their teachers.<sup>118</sup> Their preferred medium is thus nothing less than stolen goods. It is also thoroughly transient. Levitt’s decision to study children’s art must have piqued the interest of her FAP patrons, but it is doubtful they anticipated an archive showing child art reveling in sexuality, trumpeting rivalries and hatreds, and delving into forbidden zones. Levitt uncovers aspects of the child psyche that might go by the terms the vulgar, the id, or “the Imp of the Perverse,” as Edgar Allen Poe memorably called it.<sup>119</sup>

In this way, Levitt’s archive of “the minds of New York children” has something in common with the new conception of childhood that Melanie Klein was theorizing in 1937, in which the child becomes a modern subject beset by conflicting feelings of aggression and reparation, love and hate. This is not to say that Helen Levitt was reading Klein (or Freud, for that matter). She almost certainly was not. But she did not need to, for post-Freudian child psychology was making steady inroads into popular culture.

Consider, for example, that in November of 1937, the *New Yorker* published a five page article reporting on recent research conducted “for the glory of Child Psychology.”<sup>120</sup> The research in question (conducted by an unnamed person) consisted of a collection of verses and rhymes gleaned from child lore for the sake of knowledge—a “great garner” of songs “soon to be offered in a dissertation for the Doctorate of Philosophy.” In light of the fact that Levitt read *The*

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<sup>118</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.19.2007.

<sup>119</sup> Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse” was first published in the 1845 July issue of *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*.

<sup>120</sup> “Onward and Upward with the Arts: Songs of Innocence.” *The New Yorker*, November 13, 1937, p. 32-39.

*New Yorker* religiously, the conclusions drawn from this collection of “Songs of Innocence” are strikingly pertinent to our task of interpreting her work.

The *New Yorker* reporters, Dorothy Mills and Morris Bishop, begin by invoking—to ironic effect—the ideal of the romantic child: “Heaven, we are aware, lies about us in our infancy. Does the poetry of children preserve any nostalgic record of that better world from which they have descended, trailing clouds of glory?”<sup>121</sup> The answer turns out to be an emphatic no, for the collection of songs confirms a post-Freudian view of childhood rather than the by now outdated Wordsworthian model. Instead of a state of natural grace or a phase of pure innocence, the rhymes and chants present childhood as “a strange and sometimes horrid underworld.” The children hurl insults similar to those recorded in Levitt’s graffiti messages (“Pancho stinks” and “Bill Jones mother is a hore”):

Roses are red,  
Violets are blue,  
Elephants are fat  
And so are you.

Roses are red  
Violets are blue,  
If I had your mug,  
I’d join the zoo.

Mills and Bishop observe with a combination of obvious pleasure and gentle outrage that one of the prime pastimes in this “strange and sometimes horrid underworld of childhood” involves “observ[ing]” and “caricatur[ing] the universe of their elders”: “They reduce our sophisms to the elementary simplicities—violence, anger, love and brutal humor.” Just as Levitt’s archive of the child mind betrays an unconscious obsession with the body, the *New Yorker* writers find that “The world view, the *Weltanschauung* of childhood’s literature is dominated by physical facts and the phenomena of the physical world,” offering as an example the following chant:

Eight and eight are sixteen,  
Stick your nose in kerosene,  
Wipe it off with ice cream.

If Levitt did indeed read this article, she seems above all to have shared the writers’ conviction that the child’s world is interesting for the fact that the obsession with physicality produces a ribald comedy:

The child, most indefatigable of jokers, finds all experience an occasion for humor. The whole spectacle of the world is comic. Specifically, he finds risible all physical peculiarities, such as fat or ugliness, all offensive smells, sounds, and actions, and love, and intoxication, and wounds and contusions. His humor is reflected, and perhaps guided, by the *Schadenfreude* of the funny papers. His art fulfills the definition of art as a

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p.32.

criticism of life, for he regards adult experience coldly, transfers it into concepts meaningful to himself, and states them in satirical and critical terms. He is a master of the change of pace, the shift of mood, the juxtaposition of pathos and bathos which is the humorist's most serviceable device.<sup>122</sup>

The naïveté of the drawings in Levitt's collection display an analogous "juxtaposition of pathos and bathos" through their ludicrous exaggeration of human morphology. Consider, for example, the four figures and faces scribbled energetically upon the railing of a stoop in figure 1.30. The young artist's rough but expressive handiwork brings to mind the words of Töpffer that I quoted earlier:

I have seen, and you also, that most of these [children's] works, all wrong and messily drawn as they are, still vividly reflect, besides imitative intention, an intention of thought, in such a way that the thought is all the more evident because of the graphic ignorance of the designer.

The child's conceit of wildly abundant hair, demonically exaggerated grins, and truncated bodies may result from the "the graphic ignorance of the designer," but it produces a powerful effect of caricature, a hyper-animate sense of presence. The word "sister," crudely written but distinctly singled out with a pointing arrow, implies a family drama that is vaguely post-Freudian but far from the heteronormative narrative of the classic Oedipal drama. Here the drama pivots around the place of the anomalous "Sister" in this parade of female figures. Deprived of any kind of body, her floating head is dominated by an exaggerated O of a mouth, as if she is crying out in shock or dismay (Is she an *infant* sister—a usurper?)<sup>123</sup> She is formally severed from the other three figures, whose monstrously copious hair and exaggerated smiles make them into figures of manic joy.

What Levitt is doing here, of course, is seizing and extending the elastic concept of primitivism. As we have already seen, Elizabeth McCausland could assume in 1936 that a lay audience would understand the compliment she intended in calling the children of the underprivileged classes "genuine little primitives." In 1937, when Levitt began to collect children's chalk drawings and graffiti, primitivism was on its way to becoming the *lingua franca* of modern art in America, as it had already been in Europe at least since Gauguin set sail for Tahiti. By 1938, Robert Goldwater would publish his landmark study, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*. The massive attention to surrealism that ensued from the 1936-1937 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art would further fuel the primitivizing fires (though the ground was already laid: Martha Graham had composed her *Primitive Mysteries* in 1931). With the popularization of psychology and anthropology, "the categories *the unconscious* and *the primitive*" began to develop "complex cultural lives" in the American context.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid. p.32

<sup>123</sup> As Anne Wagner insightfully points out, the multiple figures could also be taken to represent a single sister who is evolving (right to left) or devolving (left to right).

<sup>124</sup> Michael Leja. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993) p.7.

If a version of primitivism prompted Levitt to produce literally hundreds of photographs of child art, it was because primitivism, in all its protean flexibility and fundamental contradictions<sup>125</sup>, offered special resources for thinking and visualizing the body. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when abstraction claimed the mantle of modernity, figuration relied on primitivizing visual idioms.<sup>126</sup> The turn to the primitive has to do with the desire to signify the corporeal, the sexual, and the subjective<sup>127</sup> in an age when the technological, the disembodied, and the rational come to dominate everyday life—as we have already seen in Huxley’s response to the Spanish children’s drawings.

### ***1938: From child art to the wild child***

Levitt devotion to children’s chalk drawings and graffiti was an important episode in her transition from apprentice to artist. In a sense, she used the collection of children’s art the way modernist painters such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Henri Matisse had done before her: to identify and claim a set of aesthetic values based on the qualities perceived in the child’s art. The qualities Levitt’s eye sought out included a ribald stress on the body, a pleasure in the gestural dimension of mark-making, and a delight in satiric caricatures. Her work under the support of the Federal Art Project had given her the validation of photography as a professional identity and an extended period spent interacting with children. Indeed, of the 159 Levitt pictures deposited at the National Archive, seventeen are portraits of the young artist at work. In a number of cases, Levitt has clearly asked the child to stand and pose beside his, her, or their artwork (note that in at least one case—figure 1.31—the modernist effect of a palimpsest or collage results from collaborative effort). But in some cases she has avoided the stiff protocol of the pose, striving to preserve the child’s quality of deep absorption even as she creeps in close (fig. 1.32). We see evidence that she has begun to conceptualize her goal as photographing not just the child, but the child’s state of immersion in a world of fantasy play. That attention to the child’s autonomous world of make-believe would lead her to a new phase of work: the crucial pictures of children’s play that she began to produce in 1938, which are the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>125</sup> One of the abiding contradictions of primitivism is the temporal fission it pursues by suturing the modern to the (imagined) deep past. See Leja, *ibid.* Likewise, as Michael North explains about the European reception of African masks, paradoxical claims undergird the primitivist turn: “African art is portrayed [in Europe circa 1907] as both abstract and naturalistic, highly conventional and thrillingly crude, opaque and yet more naked than any merely unadorned face” in “Modernism’s African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration,” *The Dialect of Modernism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The literature on primitivism has grown vast, particularly in the wake of the notoriously Eurocentric exhibition and catalogue by William Rubin, *“Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Boston: New York Graphic Society Books, 1984). Among the important sources are James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, ed., *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>126</sup> Consider, for example, such famous landmarks as Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Matisse’s *Blue Nude*, Dubuffet’s *Large Coaly Nude*.

<sup>127</sup> Carol S. Eliel discusses the linkage between primitive or outsider art and figuration in the age of abstraction in her essay “Moral Influence and Expressive Intent: A Model of the Relationship between Insider and Outsider” in *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Princeton University Press: 1992).

## Chapter Two:

### World as Stage: Play, Performance, and Theatricality in Levitt's Work, 1938-1940

*All play moves, and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course...All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.* Johann Huizinga

1938 to 1940 count as pivotal years for Helen Levitt's photographic practice. In that brief but highly productive span of time, she began to focus on children's play, and in doing so she discovered a new relationship to the act of photographing in the city streets. At the same time, she forged a new set of social relationships that would prove crucial to the development of her career.

By 1940 Levitt had produced some of the key pictures that would define her vision and catalyze her breakthrough into the public eye (fig. 2.1-2.3): young bandits shinnying up a barren tree trunk (1938), or hiding out behind a brownstone stoop with their toy guns at the ready (1938); masqueraders poised to enter the Halloween rites (1939); a group of kids experimenting with the scattered shards and frame of a broken mirror (ca. 1940).<sup>128</sup>

The theme of urban children's play would occupy the forefront of her attention from 1938 to 1943, although in a sense she would never be finished with it. She would continue to revisit and renew the subject well into the 1970s (fig. 2.4). Indeed, she brought such intensity and depth to her pictures of play that it seems to have become more than her favorite theme; it was her photographic obsession, her leitmotif, and the *genius loci* of her imaginary New York.

What drew Levitt to return, again and again, to the sight of children's play? The question points to the fact that when it comes to photography, quantity matters—the medium literally generates multiples, and it encourages its practitioners to work in series. Between 1938 and 1943, Levitt made somewhere between fifty and one hundred or more photographs of children playing in the city streets. It is difficult to determine an exact number because there has been substantial loss of material over the years. (Sadly, Levitt recalled having discarded a whole subset of her work stored in her personal archive once it became infected with fungus, though she could not remember exactly when she did so.) One solid fact available to us is the number of works presented at her 1943 exhibition "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children" at the Museum of Modern Art; fifty-six are listed on the checklist that remains in the MOMA archives. Even so, the final number remains in doubt, since a numbering error in the museum's checklist suggests there may only have been fifty-four.<sup>129</sup> Nevertheless, we can be sure that by 1943, upwards of fifty of her photographs of children had merited inclusion in the museum. Recently, scholars have reckoned that approximately two-thirds or more of Levitt's total published pictures from

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<sup>128</sup>The dates I am using are those published in the 1991 exhibition catalogue. Although those dates are in all likelihood reliable, in general, much uncertainty surrounds the dating of Levitt's pictures.

<sup>129</sup>MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file #221.

her lifetime's work concern children and their play.<sup>130</sup> Compared to Atget's massive compendium of Parisian architectural ornaments, the number is not enormous, but it represents a substantial body of work devoted to her chosen theme.

The question remains open as to why Levitt photographed children at play in the city streets in such depth and breadth. On one level, we can infer that her initial turn to children's play was a logical outgrowth of her extended effort to record children's art. Most scholarship on Levitt tends to locate her motivation for looking so extensively at children's play either in the nature of children (their supposed lack of inhibition) or in the sensibility of the photographer (her supposed shyness).<sup>131</sup> To my eye, it makes more sense to begin by recognizing that children's play—like children's art—had become a flashpoint of interest in 1930s New York. As I have argued, scenes of children at play pervaded the photographic cultures that shaped Levitt's eye, including the socially engaged photography on the left, the avant-gardism exemplified by Henri Cartier-Bresson's work, and the flourishing culture of popular photography.

In fact, there is a paradox to reckon with: if Levitt made the subject indelibly her own, she did so at a moment when photographs of urban children's play were fast becoming a visual cliché. Yet she managed to transform the trope into something new and different. I am concerned in this chapter to understand *how* and *why*. What makes her photographs of children's play seem so extraordinary, so significant? What differentiates them from other views of the subject? What new kinds of meanings did she grant to city children's play? The answers, I intend to show, hinged on two things: first, her ability to synthesize multiple ways of looking at children that prevailed in the 1930s, and secondly, her growing attention to the theatricality of play, and of photography itself.

In order to back up these claims, the chapter proceeds in two sections. The first half works to situate Levitt's sense of children's play in relation to that of key contemporaries and predecessors who shared her interest in the subject. The goal is to help us understand the range of imagery being produced in the city streets, the cultural sectors they stemmed from, and the purposes they served. That is to say, we need to survey the various photographic incarnations of the street child on offer in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The second half of the chapter analyzes the quality of theatricality that, I argue, sets her work apart from the more conventional views of the street child that prevailed at the time.

## **I. Photographing Children's Play, circa 1938: A Brief History**

East Side, West Side, all around the town, boys and girls together hanging around shop doors; whispering, giggling in tenement hallways, in courtyards smelling of backhouses...

Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide*, 1939

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<sup>130</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, "Seeing with One's Own Eyes" estimates that "...more than two-thirds of [Levitt's] photographs portray children at play or with their parents and traces of their play..." *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), p. 143.

<sup>131</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg credits Levitt's interest in children to their "uninhibited" play, as discussed in chapter one. Colin Westerbeck attributes Levitt's persistent attraction to children to the photographer's ostensible shyness: "Her shyness is apparent...in the subjects she chose when she first took up photography...The shyness of the photographer who chooses children as her subject is obvious. Children are much less intimidating than adults, more approachable." *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), p. 264. Andrea Henkens reiterates his claim on p.122 of *Flanerie in der Grossstadt*, op. cit.



By 1938, when Levitt adopted children's play as her leitmotif, the theme was springing up everywhere in visual culture. A long list of camera workers shared and predated Levitt's interest in children who appropriate city spaces for their private games.<sup>132</sup>

Consider, for example, Weegee's *Summer, Lower East Side*, 1937 (fig. 2.5), in which a dozen children seem to squeal with pleasure as they stand in the cool spray of an opened hydrant. Weegee presents his excitable children as signs of the urban spectacle, and perhaps of the physicality imputed to working-class bodies, for he places the four half-naked children at the center of the pictorial space. Approaching the scene from a wide angle, he uses a horizontal format to maximize the number of children visible within the frame, rendering them as a miniature crowd. Earlier, Ben Shahn had made a whole series of photographs examining the play of city children in the first half of the 1930s,<sup>133</sup> as had his friend Walker Evans—both of whom Levitt considered “a big influence” on her work. The Photo League, where Levitt had first educated her eye, had also promoted a widespread interest in the theme. In 1935, the League sponsored an exhibition titled “The City Child” and dubbed it “undoubtedly the most important exhibition” in the League's history.<sup>134</sup> It's not surprising, then, to see that the subject abounds in pictures by such League-affiliated practitioners as Aaron Siskind, Walter Rosenblum, Morris Engel,<sup>135</sup> Sid Grossman, and others, all of whom treated the visibility of children in the street as a notable characteristic of working-class life. The child was also an important symbol for Levitt's fellow photographers affiliated with the Federal Art Project, as I discuss in greater detail below. The theme of the city child made such inroads into photographic representation that it even infiltrated into the pages of *Minicam*, a popular magazine marketed to miniature camera enthusiasts. In 1943, just one month after Helen Levitt's debut exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Minicam* published the layout shown in figure 2.6. The saccharine little photograph of two smiling children wearing upside down pails (at lower left) appeared in a multi-page article titled “Any Woman Can Make Good Pictures!” The accompanying caption labels the children “THE MIMICS” and asserts that “The natural play of slum children in the city parks has furnished endless subject matter,” suggesting that public play carried distinct class connotations.

In reviewing numerous photographs of urban children's play that were produced from the late 1930s into the early 1940s, I have identified four distinct modes of representing children then circulating in American visual culture: the ethnographic document, the reformist vision, the

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<sup>132</sup> Alan Marcus, “Looking Up: The Child in the City,” argues that since “...its inception, documentary photography has placed the experience of children at the center of the urban frame.” He discusses four 20<sup>th</sup> century photographers who “photographed the children and adolescents of New York City” between the late 1930s and 1940s: Gordon Parks, Helen Levitt, Walter Rosenblum, and Jerome Liebling. *History of Photography* Vol. 30 #2 Summer 2006, p.119. As I show in this chapter, the list is in fact far longer.

<sup>133</sup> Laura Kazman identifies “A Child's World” as a consistent interest of Shahn's in her essay, “Ben Shahn's New York,” *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (Cambridge, New Haven, and London: Harvard University Art Museums and Yale University Press, 2000), p.29-34, but she does not quantify the total number devoted to the theme.

<sup>134</sup> Aaron Siskind, “League News,” *Filmfront* January 28, 1935, p.13. The Film and Photo League's house newsletter had a complicated history, partly because it was a do-it-yourself mimeographed affair and partly because the group altered its identity over the course of the 1930s. From December 1934 – March 1935, the League's publication was *Filmfront*; it became *Photo Notes* from February 1938 – Spring 1950, but sometimes went by *Members' Bulletin*, *Photo League Bulletin*, and *Photo League Notes*. See Nathan Lyons, introduction to *Photo Notes February 1938 – Spring 1950 and Filmfront December 1934 – March 1935: A Visual Studies Reprint Book*. (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1977).

<sup>135</sup> The October 1938 issue of *Photo Notes* announces that “Morris Engel has been carrying off all the prizes these days. At the last meeting he won a half gross of 8 x 10 enlarging paper for a photograph of two children playing on the street.” p.2 *ibid*.

entertaining vignette, and the surrealist icon. Together, these axes of production provided an essential foundation for Levitt's vision of play to emerge—though as we shall see, Levitt's pictures ultimately refuse to settle into any of these categories. Instead, she seemed to draw elements from each one only to recombine them in a ludic fashion. In synthesizing and reimagining these four ways of looking at children, she rejected the ethos of documentary photography that prevailed in the 1930s in order to play with photography's kinship to theater, performance, and cinema.

### **Street play as a sign of working-class life: the ethnographic document**

By the late 1930s, urban children's play was a favored motif within a practice of documentary photography concerned to produce ethnographies of everyday working-class life. A major incubator for this line of work was the New York Film and Photo League, the lively grassroots organization where Levitt had found significant resources for educating her eye. In light of Levitt's recognition of children's play as a subject worthy of investigation, it is striking to note the frequency with which League photographers chose to represent urban children at play within their photographic surveys of everyday life in the poorer neighborhoods of New York City. For example, Sid Grossman, who was a friend of Levitt's,<sup>136</sup> and an important teacher at the League,<sup>137</sup> repeatedly fixated on children's play in his studies of working-class life. In figure 2.7, for instance, the jump rope play of young girls becomes part of the hectic confusion—as well as the vitality and communality—of life in the crowded blocks of Harlem.

Similarly, Grossman's colleague Aaron Siskind, one of the leading participants in the League's collaborative Harlem Document project, also considered urban children's play a definitive expression of the excitement and difficulty of life in the city streets (fig. 2.8).<sup>138</sup> His scene of four boys playing with swords makes for a provocative comparison to Levitt's way of looking at similar "material," as she would call it (fig. 2.9). In both Siskind and Levitt's photographs, the boys' bodies become dynamic vectors of aggressive fun. But Siskind seems to be especially interested in mounting a challenging visual arrangement—framing the boys from below, bifurcating the space with the plank, rendering the boys into stark silhouettes—whereas Levitt is primarily concerned with the dance-like quality of the boys' lunging movements, the curious quality of theatricality introduced by the presence of a mask, and the stage-like enclosure of the pictorial space. (Levitt's theatricality is a topic about which I will have much more to say in section two of this chapter.)

Walker Evans and Ben Shahn had both made photographs that devoted particular attention to the urban children's play even earlier, between 1932 and 1935, when they worked

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<sup>136</sup> Author interview with Levitt 2.21.2008

<sup>137</sup> Sid Grossman (1913-1955) was a founding member (with Sol Libsohn) of the Photo League where he "organized classes in documentary photography, founded the Documentary Group; served on the executive board; was a reviewer, writer, and editor for the League's newsletter, *Photo Notes*. His 1940 photographs of labor union activity led to FBI investigations and the blacklisting of the League as a communist front in 1947." Robin Lenman *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Jane Livingston discusses Grossman's important role as a League teacher in *The New York School: Photographs, 1936-1963* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1992). See also Anne Tucker, Claire Cass and Stephen Daiter, *This Was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War*, (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001).

<sup>138</sup> Siskind (1903-91) was a member of the Photo League from 1932-1941, per Robin Lenman, op. cit., p.581. See also Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little, Brown in association with Center for Creative Photography, 1982).

closely together (Evans rented a studio in the same Greenwich Village building in which Shahn lived.)<sup>139</sup> Their mutual influence is evident in their strikingly similar scenes of boys grouped together on a stoop in the throes of a game (fig. 2.10-2.12).

To be sure, there are significant differences between the work of Evans, on the one hand, and Shahn and the Photo Leaguers, on the other, not least when it comes to the avowed politics of their work—Evans famously refused to countenance a political reading of his work, whereas Shahn and the Leaguers were more apt to embrace the 1930s rallying cry of the “camera as weapon.”<sup>140</sup> Even so, despite these differences, what they share in looking to urban children’s play is a fascination with the social geography of class difference. They perceive the urban child who plays in the streets as an emblem of everyday working-class life.

They also start from the 1930s premise that photography is “the instrument of our time”<sup>141</sup> because of its power to document the diverse social realities of American life. Staking everything on the documentary function of the photograph—the ascendant photographic notion of the latter half of the 1930s—they followed in the footsteps of such predecessors as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis, who had also been fascinated by the play of working-class children in the city streets.

Riis, a journalist and lecturer famous for his lantern slide presentations and publications about poverty in New York, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *The Children of the Poor* (1892), had made numerous photographs concerned with the ubiquity of urban children in the street, which he lamented (from his middle class reformer’s perspective) as “the school children’s only playground” (fig. 2.13)<sup>142</sup> For Riis, the wayward children who spend their days (and sometimes nights) in the streets represent a shocking betrayal of middle-class domestic values.

During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—shortly after Riis’s moment—the camera man and dedicated social reformer Lewis Hine photographed street children’s work and play repeatedly to critique an economic system willing to exploit child labor (fig. 2.14). By 1939 there was renewed attention to Hine’s work in League circles.<sup>143</sup> The primary occasion for this resurgence of interest in Hine was the January 1939 retrospective of his work held at the Riverside Museum in Brooklyn, initiated and organized by photographer Berenice Abbott and

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<sup>139</sup> Kaztman “Ben Shahn’s New York,” op. cit. p. 9-10.

<sup>140</sup> Leah Ollman, *Camera as Weapon: Worker Photography between the Wars: An Exhibition*. (San Diego, CA: Museum of Photographic Arts, 1991) For details about Shahn’s leftist activism, see *Ben Shahn’s New York*.

<sup>141</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, (New York, Ballantine Books, 1969), p.11. First published 1941.

<sup>142</sup> David Nasaw reproduces a Riis photograph taken on Hester Street in the early 1890s and notes that Riis captioned it “the school children’s only playground” in *Children of the City: At Work and At Play*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985) p.21. Sally Stein provides an excellent study of Riis’s career—and the status of his legacy in the 1930s—in “Making Connections with the Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis,” in *Afterimage*, Vol. 10 #10, May 1983. Stein notes that the late 1930s witnessed “a modest revival of interest” in Riis’s work, including the 1938 publication of Louise Ware’s biography *Jacob A. Riis: Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen*. She also points out that the “we need to remember that if the 30s is now remembered as a kind of Golden Age of the image, and especially the documentary image, it was not until the last years of the decade that documentary photography may be said to have come into its own.” p.9.

<sup>143</sup> For example, the January 1939 issue of *Photo Notes* announces “Hine Exhibition Opens”: “A retrospective of Lewis W. Hine’s documentary photographs opened at the Riverside Museum, 310 Riverside Drive (103<sup>rd</sup> St.) on January 11<sup>th</sup>. These 128 prints, made between 1905 and 1938, are the work of a man who participated actively and responsibly in the social reform movement of the early 1900s and who still makes the ‘photography of social betterment’ a career.” op. cit., p.2

her partner, critic Elizabeth McCausland.<sup>144</sup> The impetus to re-examine Hine's work was also furthered by MOMA photography curator Beaumont Newhall, whom Hine had visited in 1938 to show his portfolio of work. (Hine decided to call on Newhall after having been overlooked in MOMA's pivotal 1937 exhibition, "Photography: 1839-1937.") "Deeply impressed by the photographs" that Hine presented, Newhall responded by publishing two important articles that featured Hine prominently: "A Documentary Approach to Photography" in the March 1938 issue of *Parnassus*, and "Lewis Hine" in the November 1938 issue of *Magazine of Art*.<sup>145</sup>

Since at least the turn of the century, when Riis and Hine were active, the conjunction of the child and the street had been a prime symbol of the shock, strain, and excitement of urbanization. As great waves of urban migration forcibly altered the cultural, geographic, and psychological landscapes of modernity, commentators were struck by the sight of countless children flooding the streets of working-class districts. For Henry James, the Lower East Side of New York City provoked "the sense...of a great swarming, a swarming that had begun to thicken infinitely...the children swarmed above all."<sup>146</sup> More sympathetically, Theodore Dreiser spoke of the Lower East Side as "rich in those quickly withering flowers of flesh and blood, the boys and girls of the city."<sup>147</sup>

Historians inform us that, the class prejudice audible in these words aside—Henry James's horror is unmistakable, for it is insects that "swarm"—the streets were indeed the main playgrounds of New York City's children in the first decades of the twentieth century. As historian David Nasaw writes in his wonderful book, *The Children of the City*,

The children played in the streets because there was nowhere else for them. Urban space was a commodity, an item bought and sold like any other...With space at a premium, even the backyards were too valuable to be given over to the children...Indoors was for adults; children only got in the way: of mother and her chores, of father trying to relax after a long day at work, of boarders who worked the night shift and had to sleep during the day.<sup>148</sup>

Nasaw describes children being consigned to the streets out of necessity, but he goes on to insist that they by no means resented spending their free time there. On the contrary, he believes they claimed the streets as their "true homes".<sup>149</sup> The great literary critic Alfred Kazin—who was Levitt's exact contemporary, having also been born in 1913—remembered his own Brownsville childhood spent outdoors on the streets more as a matter of resistance and difficulty, writing that it was "fought out on the pavement and in the gutter, up against the walls of the houses and the glass fronts of the drugstore and the grocery."<sup>150</sup> Levitt, too, remembered the streets as the

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<sup>144</sup> See *Photo Story: Selected Letters and Photographs of Lewis W. Hine*, ed. by Daile Kaplan (Washington, 1992), chapter 3, "The Social Documentary Photograph as Art, 1938-39."

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p.111.

<sup>146</sup> Henry James, *The America Scene* (New York, 1946), quoted in David Nasaw, *The Children of the City: At Work and At Play*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1985). p.17.

<sup>147</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City* (New York, 1923), quoted in *ibid.* p.17.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p.17.

<sup>149</sup> Nasaw quotes "Catharine Brody, a journalist who grew up on a city block in Manhattan," and who wrote a memoir of her urban childhood for *The American Mercury* in 1928. She declared that for the city child, "...there was no such thing as gathering or playing in the house" for "The streets were the true homes of the [city's] small Italians, Irish and Jews." Quoted in Nasaw, *op. cit.* p.19

<sup>150</sup> Kazin, *Walker in the City*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1951) p.84.

primary playgrounds of her childhood: “We [Helen and her two brothers] were always out in Brooklyn, playing in the street.”<sup>151</sup>

The historical evidence points to a longstanding tradition of seeing children who play in the streets as one of the defining features of urban working-class life, a tradition that can be traced back to the turn of the century, if not earlier. It could be called the tradition of the street child, and its roots might be said to extend back to novels by Charles Dickens and Emile Zola. A classic example is Nana from Zola’s *L’Assommoir*, who embodies the degradation that results from her parents’ poverty. Nana’s unsupervised games in the street are, in Zola’s telling, a symptom and catalyst of dissolution:

Her latest brainwave was to go and play in the blacksmith’s opposite, and there she would swing all day on cart-shafts, hide with gangs of guttersnipes in the dim recesses of the yard, lit by the red glow from the forge, and then suddenly tear out, shouting, disheveled, and filthy...<sup>152</sup>

The fascination of “gangs of guttersnipes” involved their marked difference from middle class domestic norms. The guttersnipe was a metonym for all the ways that urban working-class life differed from the bourgeois doctrine of home as a sanctified space of retreat. That is to say, the street child was the antithesis to the sheltered child who makes sacred bourgeois notions of private family life. Consider, as an emblem of that bourgeois ideal, Clarence White’s *Ringtoss* from 1911 (fig. 2.15). White’s photograph presents three girls in spotless white dresses within the spatial container of a domestic interior. With its shining clean floor, bathed in light, and its ethereal curtains, the room shuts out the noise and bustle of the world outside. The homosocial grouping expunges any threat of sexuality from within the interior space, and it links feminine bodies to the domestic hearth. The game they play is quiet and orderly; although it may be gently competitive, they politely take turns. The picture foregrounds the circular form of the game’s rings, a form that suggests the cyclical order of nature, as well as an allegory of maturity. In this picture’s imaginary space, the modern world is held at bay.

White’s pictorialist vision, implicated as it is in intertwined notions of aesthetic autonomy and bourgeois interiority, had been rendered outmoded by the grim reality of the Depression, when one out of four workers were unemployed, and the slump threatened to become interminable. By Levitt’s time, both the promises and failures of modernity could no longer be kept apart from an autonomous aesthetic realm. Thus, Ben Shahn’s scenes of boys playing in the doorway of a shuttered storefront are the very inverse of White’s mode of representing children’s play. Shahn’s boys jostle and crowd each other in a pell-mell fashion, and the game they play seems rough and perhaps illicit—we wonder if they are gambling like Riis and Hine’s boys, who crouch on the ground to shoot craps, a game that to a moralizing eye implies youthful exposure to unwholesome habits.

### **The danger of street play: the reformist vision**

The familiar sight of children “swarming” in such densely populated neighborhoods as the Lower East Side and Harlem may have been a personally resonant, perhaps nostalgic sight

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<sup>151</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

<sup>152</sup> Emile Zola, *L’Assommoir*, 1876 trans. Leonard Tancock, (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) p.246.

for photographers who remembered their own working-class childhoods, such as Shahn and Levitt—but it was by no means to be taken for granted. Powerful voices were questioning whether urban children ought to be playing in the city streets.

In an article published in the *New York Times* in April of 1939, Mark McCloskey, the Director of Recreation for the New York City Board of Education, warned that New York has “a special problem.”<sup>153</sup> Would the children of New York City have access to a government-supervised recreation program that “gave them as much freedom as possible with a maximum of safety to themselves and to property” or would they be lured by “the thrill and excitement of so many forbidden pleasures—playing along the waterfront, hitching onto trucks, scrambling into vacant buildings?” (fig. 2.16)

If McCloskey saw a special problem in the unsupervised play of city children, he also was prepared to lay out some answers. What was needed, in his view, was a truly modern program of *organized* recreation. McCloskey’s article presumes *Times* readers will understand play as far too important to be left up to children alone, not in a city that “has few places where [they] can climb a tree; practically no place where they can build a fire and cook a hot dog.”<sup>154</sup> Lacking the resources of a rural setting—trees, space for such pastoral pursuits as hot dog cooking—the city, McCloskey implies, must be unsuitable for children’s distractions, and thus their play needed enlightened reform (fig. 2.17).

In sketching the principles of a modern program of organized play, McCloskey’s article builds on beliefs developed in the 1920s and 1930s. It starts from the premise that play is an inherently important, necessary, and complex activity, and that children themselves are complicated creatures. These ideas were relatively new in 1939; they reflect the emergence of a class of child experts that came into view in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and whose advice carried the imprimatur of scientific authority—the psychologists, doctors, educators, and sociologists who treated childhood as a condition to be studied.<sup>155</sup> Whereas the 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to see children as angelically innocent and intrinsically robust, by the 1920s and 1930s, the dominant conception of childhood had shifted; increased psychological probing of the young had instigated a model in which children began to seem increasingly vulnerable to “inner psychological demons and even physical failings.”<sup>156</sup> The child was now construed as a vulnerable being in need of careful protection from risk and danger.<sup>157</sup>

Premised on these beliefs, McCloskey’s words are a call to reform children’s play within the context of the New Deal reorganization of everyday life, and photographers who participated in the Federal Art Project alongside Helen Levitt were dedicated to providing visual documents designed to arouse support for that mandate. The available evidence, though fragmentary, suggests that a significant number of pictures produced by Levitt’s cohort in the FAP

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<sup>153</sup> Mark A. McCloskey, “For City Children at Play, Variety is the Spice of Life: In Shaping a Recreational Program the Aim Is To Provide Good Exercise and an Outlet for Talents of Many Different Kinds,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1939, p.D8

<sup>154</sup> Interestingly, though, the climax of *Dead End* is structured around a scene of the rambunctious boys cooking potatoes on a fire set in a garbage can.

<sup>155</sup> The new class of child experts is discussed in Peter Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Stearns discusses the “child study movement” that began with William James, G. Stanley Hall, and Earl Banes, who subscribed to a theory of recapitulation (see chapter one); that movement reached an important milestone in 1929, when the U.S. Children’s Bureau published its pamphlet *Infant Care*, which Stearns characterizes as “the most widely sought, frequently reissued brochure the federal government ever commissioned.” p. 19.

<sup>156</sup> Stearns, *ibid.*, p.26-45.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.

Photographic Division were intended to examine the danger and disorderliness of children's play in the city streets, and to suggest the necessity of reformist intervention. Two groups of images are especially pertinent: the work of Aubrey Pollard and the photographic team of Arnold Eagle and David Robbins.<sup>158</sup>

Little information remains available about these three cameramen; they have mostly vanished into history.<sup>159</sup> What survives from the work they did for the FAP in 1937-1938 is two files of photographs currently housed in the National Archives Record Group 69, boxes 1 and 2, stored alongside Levitt's pictures of chalk drawings, in the case of Pollard, and, for Eagle and Robbins, an archive of pictures in the Museum of the City of New York. Pollard, Eagle, and Robbins were active in the FAP at roughly the same time as Helen Levitt—between 1937 and 1938;<sup>160</sup> like her, they recognized the life world of the “tenement child” as important material for visual investigation. In their case, that investigation was conducted in the spirit of reform, with the camera conceived as a utilitarian instrument that provides evidence for the shaping of public opinion.

Consider, for example, two photographs made for the FAP by Aubrey Pollard, figures 2.16 and 2.17. They belong to a series of eleven pictures extant in the National Archives. For our purposes, the labels written on the back of each photograph need special note: the energetic scene of three African-American boys hitching a ride on the back of a street car is labeled “Juvenile Aid Bureau Juvenile Delinquencies” (and dated 5.17.38); the view of boys clambering up a docked ship's prow is labeled “Juvenile Unsafe Activities, Streets of New York” (dated 5.30.38). These curt identifiers indicate that the “juvenile” or “juvenile delinquent” had become an urban type subject to the gaze of a camera acting as an instrument of discipline and control.<sup>161</sup> In reviewing these photographs, we glimpse the reformist lens being turned onto children's play in the years when Levitt adopted the theme. Moreover, Pollard constructs play as a binary opposition: Photographs such as figure 2.18, with its view of boys industriously at work in a church carpentry shop, are meant to display the wholesome activities available for the “juvenile” through the programs of the Juvenile Aid Bureau.

Similarly, Levitt's colleagues Arnold Eagle and David Robbins<sup>162</sup> devoted their “Independent Creative Assignment” at the Federal Art Project to portraying the realities faced by the one third of a nation who spent the Depression being “ill-clad, ill fed, and ill housed,” as the era's rallying cry put it. Within that effort, they repeatedly focused on the “tenement child;” their recurrent interest in the child suggests that it represented a sympathetic figure of victimization, the index of neglect and the nation's shame. Many of their key pictures show boys romping over tenement walls or playing in dirty lots—images that aim to demonstrate the dangerous and derelict conditions in which these children live.

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<sup>158</sup> It is also worth noting that, according to William Alexander in *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), Paul Strand had done camerawork, “for a group named Visugraphic, a silent two-reeler, *Where the Pavement Begins* (1928), which pleaded for more city playgrounds.” Alexander notes that “Strand did not write or edit the film and could not remember if he shot it all, but he did recollect one difficult dramatic scene where a truck smashes a doll carriage and knocks down a child.” p.69.

<sup>159</sup> For example, they do not turn up in the *Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, op. cit.

<sup>160</sup> This can be determined from the dates annotated on Pollard's photographs and the fact that Eagle and Robbins work was displayed at the Federal Art Project galleries and reviewed by *the New York Times* in October of 1938.

<sup>161</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive” is the classic study of photography's use as “modes of instrumental realism.” *October*. 39, 1986: 3-64.

<sup>162</sup> Levitt informed me that she knew Arnold Eagle and David Robbins “slightly” through the Federal Art Project. Author interview with Levitt, 2.21.2008.

Figure 2.19 is an important example of the Eagle/Robbins interest in the child as a target of WPA reform. The subject matter carried sufficient currency in the late 1930s that the picture was chosen for inclusion in the 1939 WPA Federal Writers' Project *Guide to New York City*, with a laconic caption identifying its location as "Backyards, Lower East Side." Unmentioned in the caption are the boys who climb perilously high up the fire escape and windows of a brick building, or the dangerous-looking detritus that litters the ground. For viewers in the 1930s, those boys would have required little explanation. They were readily recognizable as versions of the Dead End Kid, and the photograph would have been instantly legible as a condemnation of the alarming conditions that surround city children's play.

The picture, then, is a critique of an economic system that inflicts poverty on the innocent and vulnerable. It is also a plea for political reform. Indeed, *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, writing in October of 1938, singled out Eagle and Robbins's "one third of a nation" project for being an approach that is "quite frankly propaganda" but "propaganda that with positive splendor of affirmation justifies its use of art as a vehicle." He praised the "power and searching thoroughness" of the work produced by Eagle and Robbins on these grounds:

The horrible slum conditions of New York are revealed by way, at once, of crying aloud, in pictorial language that does not flinch or mince, a shame that exists, and of reminding us that reform is energetically afoot.<sup>163</sup>

There is reason to believe that reform *was* "energetically afoot," and that reformist representation sometimes coincided with reformist activity. Consider, for example, that by 1942, the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* would publish a special issue on "Wartime Housing" to coincide with its exhibition of that name. Article and exhibition were designed to respond to the "housing emergency" of the day by showcasing, through combinations of photo and text, the new "wartime housing facilities" being developed by the Roosevelt administration, and to proclaim the rationality—and thus the modernity—of these new living spaces. In working to educate the museum-going public about the wisdom of these programs, the editors/exhibitors gave careful attention to efforts to improve, regulate, and contain children's play within "safe" parameters. Notice, for example, how figure 2.20 declares urban children's street play to be thoroughly obsolete, a vestige of the past slated for elimination. The photographic juxtaposition contrasts the chaos and danger of the street (where genders and races mix in a scene of hectic confusion) with the supposedly wholesome orderliness of planned recreation. The accompanying caption reads, "Recreation facilities are needed for both children and adults: playgrounds, gardens, workshops, libraries, meeting place." In this context, the mass mobilization of the populace that World War II demanded gets framed as both a crisis and an opportunity, with children's play figuring prominently as one of the potential beneficiaries of the new government intervention into everyday life. Nor was this an isolated picture within the entirety of the *Bulletin's* photo essay. On the contrary, among the ten photographs arranged in a "This"/"Not This" set of pairings, six show children within the frame, and four are concerned with the proper environment in which children ought to play.<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, in Levitt's hometown, city children's play had become a politicized concern between the late 1930s and the early 1940s, as the street culture of the "slums" was subjected to initiatives to remake New York's urban infrastructure. In 1933, New York City's Mayor Fiorella

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<sup>163</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, "Camera: Aspects of America in Three Shows," *New York Times*, October 2, 1938.

<sup>164</sup> *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. IX #4, May 1942, p.12-15.



H. La Guardia had appointed Robert Moses chief of the City Parks Department and head of the Triborough Bridge Authority; under Moses's supervision, New York City was undergoing a massive restructuring of its urban topography that included a wholesale reinvention of public leisure designed to produce "cleaner and more orderly recreation."<sup>165</sup> As writer Hulbert Footner put it in his 1937 book *New York: City of Cities*:

The death rate in Allen Street [in the Lower East Side] mounted to such a scandalous figure that the city was finally forced to buy up and tear out one whole side of the street to let in sun and air. Now they have done the same thing in Essex Street two blocks away and Roosevelt Park has been struck through between Chrystie and Forsythe Streets. Across town also, Delancey has become Schiff Parkway and East Houston has been opened wide. While they are deciding what to do with Houston Street, I notice that the Mayor or his indefatigable Park Commissioner, Robert Moses, has laid out all the little unoccupied spaces for games of handball or bowls. It is heartening to see the young men playing games. Heretofore all the playgrounds have been for children. All in all, great strides have been made in letting the sun into the lower East Side, but so far no decent housing has been provided for people who are forced to live there.

Although Footner is speaking to the novelty of play spaces for "the young men," the visual archive suggests that children often provided the persuasive rationale, the photogenic icon, for an increasingly rationalized approach to the organization of urban leisure.<sup>166</sup>

What this brief survey of the WPA work of Pollard, Eagle, and Robbins reveals, I think, is that for many photographers working in the late 1930s and early 1940s, children functioned, in general, as a propaganda figure *par excellence*. Consider, for example, how frequently Dorothea Lange placed children at the center of her vision: from the abject sorrow of *Damaged Child* to the religious iconography of *Migrant Mother*, the abandoned or helpless child personified a whole class of people who were conceived as needing the succor and protection of the (paternal) state in a time of economic collapse. In the case of Lange and many others, the rural child garnered the greatest attention; nevertheless, photographers working in New York City were quick to conceive the child of the streets as the urban counterpart to the suffering rural child.

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<sup>165</sup> The key text on Moses's remaking of New York is Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975). The phrase "a cleaner and more orderly recreation" appears on page 475 of the *New York City Guide* in a discussion of Robert Moses's plans for re-making Coney Island's beaches and boardwalk.

<sup>166</sup> Along with efforts to alter urban topography, the 1930s discourse on public space tended to favor what Sandra Phillips calls "the suburban movement to trees and sunshine" as "part of a larger idealization of the town or countryside as the true center of American democratic life" in "Helen Levitt's New York," 1991 exhibition catalogue, p.18. This is certainly the case in the 1942 "Wartime Housing" issue of the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* discussed above, which advocates hard for the superiority of a suburban lifestyle. A prime example of the new planned suburban communities was the town of Greenbelt, Maryland, "a town designed by the Resettlement Administration (RA) to alleviate poor living conditions in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, where overcrowding had forced rent to one-third above the national average," discussed in Jenna Webster's "Ben Shahn and the Master Medium" in *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, 2000. Webster explains that Shahn and Evans were commissioned to produce a film documenting the construction of this new town, but the film never came to fruition.

There is good reason to believe that Levitt's nascent interest in street children's play reflected her awareness of the new kinds of attention being brought to bear on city children's play. For Levitt's distinctive approach to the subject shares certain important points of connection to the ethnographic document and the reformist vision.

Like many photographers who worked to produce ethnographies of everyday life, Levitt's pursuit of play was fundamentally inseparable from her sustained effort to visualize the social mores of the working class experience<sup>167</sup> In particular, we can be sure that Shahn's vision was important to her, not only because she called it a "big influence" but also because she made at least one photograph the bears a striking resemblance to Shahn's work. Figure 2.21, a little known and previously unpublished photograph that must have been done early in Levitt's career—I date it to 1938<sup>168</sup>—scrutinizes three girls playing a game of cards on their front stoop. A fourth girl stands alone, looking on to the game but outside the circle of play. That slightly melancholy outcast figure is the female parallel to Shahn's boy exiled from his peers' play—both pictures present a "social initiation" subtext.<sup>169</sup>

Yet there are also important differences to note between Shahn and Levitt's respective scenes. Aesthetically, Levitt is more concerned with the formal equipoise of the picture; she devotes careful and precise observation to the complex choreography of bodies inter-relating, and she draws attention to the delicate gesture of the girl selecting her card. This is quite different from Shahn's embrace of a snapshot aesthetic, in which the overexposed sky, moments that slide out of focus, and signs for contingency and flux become visual correlatives to the hustle and bustle of urban experience. Shahn treats play as something encountered within the noisy spectacle of the street; Levitt is beginning to regard the play experience itself, to recognize its potential as her "material." She is primarily concerned with the girls' quality of absorption in their play, and most importantly, she is looking directly into the game, peering within the ludic circle.

Interestingly, Levitt seems never to have exhibited or published this picture, as far as I can tell. It remains extant today because Levitt's gallerist, the Laurence Miller Gallery, purchased from the photographer a substantial archive of prints that Levitt made for her personal use as small test prints—pictures about 3 inches high and 2 inches wide that allowed her to examine in greater clarity promising material from her contact sheets. We can only speculate as to why Levitt declined to print such a tender and vivid group portrait at full size. Perhaps she never got around to it. Or—as I suspect—it may have lacked the edge of danger that Levitt was searching for in her scenes of play.

Taking a cue from the reformist vision—but going against such a vision's stated intent—Levitt evinced a distinct preference for play marked by a strong sense of risk, danger, transgression, and aggressive fun. She focused repeatedly, for example, on children climbing to dangerous heights, such as the boy who clings to the stripped door jam of some derelict interior

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<sup>167</sup> As Phillips notes in her essay on Levitt, the photographer restricted her attention exclusively to the working-class: "No one is privileged or even middle class" in Helen Levitt's New York. op. cit. p.19.

<sup>168</sup> I judge it to be later than 1936-1937 but earlier than 1939-1940 because it shows Levitt to have put aside the tentativeness that characterized her efforts of 1936, but it is not as kinetically charged as the pictures dating to 1939 and later. If we compare it to the picture of maskers climbing a tree dated to 1938—discussed later in this chapter—we find a similar interest in quiet, secretive games transpiring in shadowy spaces.

<sup>169</sup> Katzman writes, "Shan's pictures often depict the psychological drama of children's games. in a photograph entitled *Greenwich Village* (1932-35)...a mournful boy is isolated from his peers, whose activities are hidden from view by a large column and the backs of several of the participants." p. 30 "Ben Shahn's New York"

(fig. 2.22), or the frieze of “warriors” battling it out on the narrow precipice of a doorway lintel (fig. 2.23).

Similarly, she was intrigued by the fascinations of toy guns and other improvised weaponry. In figure 2.24, she relishes the contrast between the cherubic innocence of the child’s angelic face and the implement of death that he cradles so tenderly in his hands. The same tense standoff between tenderness and threat is visible in figure 2.25, which stages the chance meeting of eros and thanatos.<sup>170</sup>

Moreover, in cases where the game itself is less overtly aggressive, the spaces in which the children play are often derelict, dangerous, or forbidden. Or they are simply hidden or half-hidden realms, with Levitt celebrating the children’s ability to create their own space within the adult world. Whether the children invade the alluring sanctum of a parked truck (fig. 2.26) or explore the rough stonework of some urban ruin (fig. 2.27), Levitt’s depictions of play consistently stake their significance on the frisson of danger that accompanies unsupervised play. Many of Levitt’s pictures bring to mind McCloskey’s words about “the thrill and excitement of so many forbidden pleasures—playing along the waterfront, hitching onto trucks, scrambling into vacant buildings...”

Levitt’s pictures, then, bear comparison to the interest in city children’s dangerous play that predominated within a reformist rubric. But this is not to say that her photographs are themselves explicitly reformist—they are not. Unlike Pollard or the team of Eagle and Robbins, Levitt refrained from captioning her pictures in a way that would make them useful to government officials debating the proper course of reform. Nor did she articulate her project as an exposé of “slum conditions.” Levitt’s was far too intrigued by the enchantment of play to argue the necessity of regulation and supervision.

To grasp the ways in which Levitt’s pictures diverge from the reformist vision, let us consider the difference between her photograph of boys fighting atop a doorway (figure 2.23) and two contemporaneous photographs made to affirm a reformist agenda. Figure 2.29 was reproduced in 1939 in the Federal Writers’ Project *WPA Guide to New York City*, with the caption “Slum Child.” The photographer is not credited. Figure 2.30 is a photograph by Aubrey Pollard; annotated (by an unknown hand) on the back “Children at play in slum area, New York,” it now resides in the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Black Culture.

In the broadest sense, the *WPA Guide* and Pollard photos share Levitt’s subject matter. Certainly, Levitt’s contemporaries were ready to identify her subjects as “slum children.” For example, when *PM Magazine* printed her famous scene of children playing with a broken mirror in 1941, the editors gave it the following caption: “This weird street scene typifies the crowded, confusing life around the slum children...”<sup>171</sup> But there is a world of difference between Levitt’s photograph and the vision on offer in the other two pictures.

The difference has to do with the way in which Levitt’s scene seems to celebrate the children’s kinetically-charged activities, whereas for the reformers, the mere presence of the “slum child” in the street seems an offense to decency. The child in the *WPA Guide* photo looks as unhappily misplaced as the upholstered chair abandoned on the sidewalk. Alone, passive, and

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<sup>170</sup> There are also a number of chalk drawings concerned with gunslingers. For example, in Levitt’s 1987 book *In the Street*, which gathers together the bulk of her chalk drawings, gunslingers can be found on p.49, p.55, p.56, p.59, p.78, p.89. And when *PM’s Weekly* published nine of her photographs on March 2, 1941, for the article “Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes On in the Minds of New York Children,” p.48-49, photo editor Ralph Steiner included two renditions of gunslingers (one female, one male) in the two page layout.

<sup>171</sup> Steiner, Ralph. “Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes On in the Minds of New York Children,” *PM’s Weekly*, March 2, 1941.

rueful, he exerts no agency on his surroundings. The children in the Pollard are less forlorn, having gathered in a group to play together. Yet the content and significance of their play remains indistinct. Pollard seems interested in pointing out their presence on the sidewalk but fails to discover or to divulge to us the significance of their play. His picture is remote, both physically and emotionally.

Notice how differently Levitt contrives similar material in her scene of boys playing on the lintel of a doorway. She has, for example, gotten close enough to achieve an extraordinary specificity in showing the boy peering around the column with his complex mixture of curiosity and shyness. More than that, by rendering the boys' rough play into a kind of living frieze (a latter day tableau vivant, perhaps) she links their physical agency to an implied artistry. Nor was this configuration a mere lucky coincidence. By comparing two other frames that Levitt made of this particular pro-filmic event (fig. 2.31a-b), we can see that she may well have engaged with the children in order to direct their play. Frame 2.31a, which resides in the collection of the Library of Congress, looks to be the first photograph in the sequence. Judging from the way that they stare down, tough-guy style, and pose for their picture (the fellow to the right is giggling at the camera), one infers that the photographer happened upon a group of daredevil boys who had clambered to the top of the disused doorway, and snapped the scene as it was. But something transpired between that initial discovery and the formation of the group into a garland of intertwined limbs. What led them to choreograph themselves into those uncannily theatrical postures? Did the photographer induce them to arrange themselves so beautifully? Or did they rise to the occasion of seeing a camera present, and show off their agile energy? It is impossible to know for certain, but it is clear that Levitt avoids making them appear passive, like the "slum child" in *the Guide*, or threateningly animalistic, like the kids in the play *Dead End*. Instead, she applied (consciously or not) the visual codes that were emerging around 1939 for the photographic representation of *privileged* children to subjects who belong to marginalized racial groups and underprivileged classes.

### **The pleasures of child's play: the entertaining vignette**

Levitt's vision of children's play coincided with a new popular interest in photographing children according to emerging codes of what I call the action portrait or entertaining vignette. Those codes were articulated in 1939 by Rudolf and Mary Arnheim in their book *Phototips on Children: The Psychology, the Technique, and the Art of Child Photography*, an instruction manual geared for parents who had the time and material resources to devote to photographing their children's play.<sup>172</sup> The Arnheims identify and discuss what they see as a significant change in the modes of photographing children: whereas once "studio portraits of children" were the norm, the new modern way to photograph children called for "everyday pictures of children" in which the child's "ordinary daily life" might be revealed. The Arnheims attribute this shift to a sea change in attitudes toward portable cameras that had rendered the studio portrait old-fashioned:

Every year more and more [professional photographers] abandon their studios and roam the outside world with a portable camera, ready to snap the chance picture with its wealth

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<sup>172</sup> Mary and Rudolf Arnheim, *Phototips on Children: The Psychology, the Technique, and the Art of Child Photography*. Richard Clay and Company, Ltd. Bungay, Suffolk. 1939. As far as I can tell, this is the same Rudolf Arnheim who is famous as an art historian and philosopher of aesthetics.

of character. Studios, massive cameras on tripods, blinding lamps and *tableau vivant* poses are no longer considered more respectable than the nomad life of the modern young man with a pocket camera, who makes unposed shots with free sunshine as his light.<sup>173</sup>

But they also identify the move toward the “outside world” as a matter of preserving and recording the pleasure the child takes in play:

People have come to see that pictures taken in one of the old-fashioned torture chambers [i.e., the studio] betrayed the fact that the children had no pleasure in having their photographs taken, and that the pictures failed to give pleasure for that very reason. Even today most children feel uncomfortable in a photographer’s studio. Their curiosity and sense of adventure have given way to a feeling of rebellious vexation by the time the actual exposure is made. And they are right, as children often are, however unwillingly we grown-ups admit it. For they feel that something unnatural is happening to them. They feel, in their own way, that they are not free.<sup>174</sup>

Within this new ethos for picturing children, the photographer’s task was to honor the child’s “curiosity and sense of adventure” by endeavoring to “watch the child and to get pictures of him in his ordinary daily life.” In articulating this new approach to child photography, the Arnheims emphasized the imperatives to “capture...the natural expression,” the “flying movement”, the “characteristic situation,” and counseled readers to take “action pictures out of doors” (figure 2.32). The Arnheims advise their readers to “Learn to recognize the important things, that is, events which are worth while snapping when there is nothing to draw our attention to them particularly...” and to remember that “a child’s energy expresses itself more naturally, more significantly, in the open air than between four walls. He runs and jumps and plays as nimbly as an animal, but with the inventiveness of a human being.”

The pictures of children that Levitt began to make between 1938 and 1939 fulfill these new expectations. She, too, emphasized children’s own pleasure in their play, their energy and their nimbleness. Dedicating herself to the project of “observ[ing] the child in the unrestricted freedom of its abundant young life,” as the Arnheims put it, Levitt made photographs that offer amusing vignettes replete with connotations of freedom, curiosity, and inventiveness. Look back, if you will, to Levitt’s photograph reproduced in figure 2.26, and compare it to figure 2.32, the Arnheims’ illustration of “the flying movement.” Note how both pictures seize the climax of a free-flying jump in order to convey the adventurousness of youth.

Yet there is an important twist: Levitt applied that new ethos of freedom and pleasure to children who belong, visibly, to the lower echelons of America’s class-and-race hierarchy. She devised a mode of photography capable of representing the children of the underclass in terms that were more typically reserved for the children of the privileged classes, whose fond parents tried to capture their offspring’s “natural” ways. Levitt’s photographs make the children of poor and working-class parents into the protagonists of the small dramas they present.

That is quite likely one of the reasons, I would argue, that Levitt’s photographs of children so thoroughly delighted the writer Richard Wright. According to scholar Sara Blair, Wright had an “avid interest” in Levitt’s work because he understood how carefully Levitt

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p.8-9

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p. 7

contrived to avoid “doctrinaire readings of poverty and delinquency.”<sup>175</sup> In fact, Wright was sufficiently moved by Levitt’s portrayals of children’s play to compose “A Recommendation,” a one page essay in which he praised her ability to “use her camera as a poetic and subjective medium of expression” through which she produces photographs that “are as strange as the world in which a child lives, as strange, as baffling, and...[which] have the capacity of filling you with infinite wonder, as only art can.”<sup>176</sup>

### **The child as a surrealist icon: Henri Cartier-Bresson**

Richard Wright’s perceptive comments pinpoint one of the most important and distinctive aspects of Levitt’s work with children’s play: her ability to suggest the strangeness of the child’s world. That sense of children’s play as something strange, “baffling” and wondrous, as Wright put it, has much to do with her awareness of the child as an icon of surrealism. Above all, she was inspired by Henri Cartier-Bresson’s interest in children, particularly his many photographs of children in Spain and Mexico. As chapter one established, Levitt considered Cartier-Bresson’s pictures a revelation; she felt that his example had taught her to think of her medium as “potentially limitless.” He also demonstrated to her—certainly through the model of his own work, and perhaps in person on the occasions when they interacted—that street photography might be conducted in a spirit of serious play, rather than strictly in earnest, as was more usually the case in the social documentary production on the left. In other words, he had shown her the possibility of a surrealist ethnography in which the “intersection” of “objective chance” and “subjective response” charges the work with an essential ambiguity.<sup>177</sup>

Cartier-Bresson devoted his photographic work in the 1930s to the “search for an ‘other’ to set against European bourgeois society...found...on the periphery of the urban environment, in the impoverishment of Mediterranean peasant life, or...the radically different culture of Mexico.”<sup>178</sup> This would become the model of working that Levitt would seek to emulate in 1938 and beyond. As Andrea Henkens writes in her dissertation, Levitt too would construct her photographic enterprise as a “search for the Other in the everyday.”<sup>179</sup> (Indeed, by 1940 Levitt would be hankering to travel to Mexico precisely to experience the terrain that had been so productive for her French hero. She did so in 1941 and there completed a series of photographs, though she found the experience less photographically rewarding than she had anticipated—for reasons discussed in chapter three).

For Cartier-Bresson, that search for an ‘other’ made the child a particular object of fascination, and it is significant for our purposes to note how often he turns his gaze to children

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<sup>175</sup> Blair, Sara. *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 71. I am grateful to Elizabeth Abel for directing me to this reference.

<sup>176</sup> Typescript, “A Recommendation,” Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Box 86, Folder 1013. No evidence is present in the archive to suggest if and where this recommendation might have been published.

<sup>177</sup> Ian Walker in *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), discusses ways in which Cartier-Bresson drew on Breton’s notion of “objective chance.” Walker quotes Cartier-Bresson: “The only aspect of the phenomenon of photography that fascinates me, and will always interest me, is the intuitive capture through the camera of what is seen. That is exactly how Breton defined objective chance (*le hasard objectif*) in his *Entretiens*.” p.171. To define objective chance, Walker cites Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993 p.142), who writes that ‘Breton uses the term not to suggest that obscured objective forces are at issue but rather that chance makes manifest repressed desire.’ p.171

<sup>178</sup> Walker, *ibid.*, “Henri Cartier-Bresson: Images a la Sauvette” p.170.

<sup>179</sup> Andrea Henkens, *Flanerie in der Grossstadt*, p.11-12.

playing, and to what powerful effect. In his 1933 travels to Spain he had made multiple photographs of the subject, and he also was drawn to children in Mexico in 1934. The most iconic of the Spanish pictures may well be the series made in Seville through the repousoir of a torn-open wall—a vision in which the conjunction of destruction and delight, of “fun and fright,”<sup>180</sup> seemed to emblemize the hysteria of a civilization on the brink of destruction (fig. 2.33). (Not for nothing did André Breton read it as a summation of the Spanish Civil War, even though it was actually made before the outbreak of that disaster).<sup>181</sup> As mentioned in chapter one, a print of this scene of children playing among ruins appeared in Cartier-Bresson’s 1935 exhibition, where Levitt saw it, studied it, and clearly never forgot it. It made a powerful impact on her, as well as on her contemporaries (Ben Shahn was “especially moved” by it).<sup>182</sup> Equally important for the kind of work Levitt was soon to make was the picture of the lone boy who seems to convulse in some private ecstasy before an ominously stained and weathered wall, one disturbingly evocative of a wall before which an execution might take place (fig. 2.34). It is worth noting that Cartier-Bresson contrived this vision by photographing a child who has “thrown a ball into the air and is waiting for it to come down”<sup>183</sup>—in 1941 Levitt would use the exact same trick in Mexico to photograph a girl who has tossed her homemade paper ball into the air and leans back to catch its descent (figure 2.35). The revelations Levitt gleaned from Cartier-Bresson, then, were not only about the iconography of the child. His work presented the possibility of a photography in which a canny excision of a scene’s narrative logic might yield an altogether more productive sense of the uncanny, and thereby incite viewers to engage subjectively with—to fantasize about—the picture (just as I have done in imagining a scene of execution). The picture’s refusal to show us what the child awaits opens up speculation on just that topic, in allegorical terms.

Figure 2.34, as much as any that Cartier-Bresson made, seems to materialize the urges that fed his early work, as described by his close friend and surrealist fellow traveler, André Pieyre de Mandiargues:

...what we were seeking...was violent emotion, rupture with the disciplines of everyday life as we knew and barely tolerated it, a certain dizziness and a certain convulsion...I asked for reality to become a dream. On occasion reality fulfilled my desire. For example when, with Henri Cartier-Bresson, I went to follow the example of Aragon in the brothels of provincial France, at Rouen or Nancy.<sup>184</sup>

If consort with prostitutes provided one route of access to the moment when reality became a dream, children presented another—not because they are “innocent,” as the simplistic

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<sup>180</sup> Lincoln Kirstein uses this phrase in the catalogue to Cartier-Bresson’s 1946 MOMA show. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lincoln Kirstein, and Beaumont Newhall, *The photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1947) p.8. In Kirstein’s words, “[Cartier-Bresson’s] early shot of children playing in the ruins of plaster walls whose holes seem torn out of the paper on which they are printed was prophecy of an imminent decade of disasters. No image since has provided such a powerful report of fused innocence and destruction, of fun and fright.”

<sup>181</sup> Ian Walker discusses Breton’s insertion, cropping, and willful misreading of the picture in *L’Amour fou*, where Breton invokes “the little children of the Spanish militia, like those I saw running naked in the outer district of Santa Cruz, on Tenerife.” op. cit. p.180-181.

<sup>182</sup> Katzman, “Ben Shahn’s New York,” op. cit. p.30.

<sup>183</sup> Walker, op. cit.. p.176.

<sup>184</sup> Quoted in Walker, op. cit. p.171, citing *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work*, op. cit. p.15.

notion goes, but because they are receptive to fantasy and make-believe. Surrealists recognized in the child one of the avatars of their world view, for surrealist investigation was deeply concerned with exploring social marginality and the “primitive Other,” as James Clifford has discussed in his essay, “On Ethnographic Surrealism.”<sup>185</sup> In Cartier-Bresson’s pictures, the mixture of the strange and the everyday is heightened by the presence of children, who are presumed to possess special access to the unconscious, to the world of dreams, and the interstices between reality and fantasy.

Levitt was not, like Cartier-Bresson, a member of the privileged (francophone and androcentric) surrealist groups that congregated around Breton and Bataille, so it is probably inaccurate to think of her work as self-consciously hewing to a “surrealist” point of view.<sup>186</sup> Yet a number of her key pictures, which can be relatively securely dated to 1938 and 1939, are invigorated by a sense of the uncanny, the marvelous, and the irrational—the elements so dear to surrealist discourse and so integral to Cartier-Bresson’s vision.

Levitt’s breakthrough into a quasi-surrealist vision seems to have involved the fascinations of masquerade. Current scholarship suggests that nineteen thirty-eight brought her first photographs of masquerade, which are reproduced here as figures 2.36-2.37a-b.<sup>187</sup> They launched what was to become an ongoing series devoted to this theme, a series that would grow to number at least eight—not an extraordinarily large number, perhaps, but a crucially important motif.<sup>188</sup> For in the early scenes of masquerade we witness Levitt crystallizing a complex engagement with fantasy, theatricality, performance, and play—the intertwined elements that, I will argue, became her indelible contribution to 20<sup>th</sup> century visual culture.

She seems to be working out those themes in the various frames that make up figures 2.36-2.37a-b, in which we find her following a pair of boys (although the gender may be ambiguous) who have contrived rudimentary masks for themselves: a folded handkerchief or dishtowel and what looks like a stiff piece of paper with eyeholes pierced through. We can examine the sequence unfolding over three frames—it is likely more were made but are now lost—and it seems to begin with the duo poised in repose on the stoop, gathering their energies for the games to begin. The frontmost boy is lifting the folded handkerchief towards his face, preparing to hide behind the cloth. With his relaxed stance and casually half unbuttoned coat, he seems to be in the midst of turning toward the camera, but his eyes are directed in a dreamy manner downward and off to the side. Perhaps he has not quite registered the photographer’s presence but is about to do so. His companion leans in a debonair fashion against a grandly classicizing portal, where yet a third mask peers out directly at the viewer—in this case, the carved relief of a mask-like visage, an inanimate sculptural presence that serves to heighten the productive confusion between animate and inanimate provoked by the presence of masks—and by the nature of photography itself.

To make this series of pictures, Levitt used a Leica outfitted with a *Winkelsucher*, a decoy eyepiece that made the camera appear to be pointing away from the true subject. These two pieces of equipment—a diminutive camera and a right-angle viewfinder—allowed the photographer to be as fleet-footed and inconspicuous as possible, enabling her to photograph people without disturbing their activities or reveries. She used a system of tools for catching life

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<sup>185</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp.117-51.

<sup>186</sup> Andrea Henkens proposes that we see Levitt’s work as a “surrealistic transformation of documentary” in her dissertation, *Flanerie in der Grossstadt*, p.11.

<sup>187</sup> They can be relatively securely dated to 1938 based on the 1991 exhibition catalogue. p.12.



in the act, a way of working designed to glimpse, preserve, and record people's un-self-conscious actions, their "natural" selves.

Yet things are not so simple. The second two pictures in the sequence show us children who are clearly aware that they are having their picture taken; in some sense, they may even be *posing* for the photographer. In figure 2.37a, one boy has clambered up the barren tree trunk and hovers above his friend; by figure 2.37b, the latter boy has mounted the tree as well. Notice how directly their masked faces stare back in both pictures. Is it too much to say that they are playing for Levitt, or playing *with* her? Time has elapsed, space has been traversed, and there has been some kind of understanding forged between the photographer and her youthful subjects, for the flow of events has moved from the liminal front space of the stoop, where the private domestic realm of the apartment house meets the public space of the street, to a dark, even gloomy, back courtyard.

The visual evidence thus complicates the conventional assumption that Levitt's achievement was primarily a function of the surreptitious gaze made possible by the right angle viewfinder, a question of catching her subjects unawares. It was instead something more subtle: a matter of constructing the illusion that we have become privy to a secret world unfolding before our eyes. By isolating the children within the pictorial frame—there are no supplementary figures who might contextualize or complicate the central event—Levitt calls to mind Johann Huizinga's observation that the "The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy."<sup>189</sup> She seems to have agreed with Huizinga that play thrives on secrecy, for she presents the children as the lone inhabitants of a strange microcosm.

The air of secrecy suffusing figure 2.37 is partly a function of the space in which the events transpire. It is a strange space indeed—a gloomy back courtyard, where the windows look blind and the dormant or dead tree is planted in a barren, rubble-strewn ground. The derelict and deserted space is at odds with the youthful vitality of the rambunctious maskers. That incongruity between energetic play and gloomy surround conveys a frisson of eeriness.

Levitt claimed to have been much influenced by Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, and these pictures suggests lessons learned from the master of the uncanny cityscape. The deserted urban space in which these children play their somber masquerade possesses a strangely stage-like quality. It brings to mind the haunted theater of the street that de Chirico imagined in paintings such as *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914).

Levitt's other important mask picture dating to 1938 (figure 2.38) garners its portentous sense of threat mostly from the extreme mystery of the isolated, confrontational figure dressed in an illegible assortment of odds and ends. It presents a nightmarish vision, for the human visage has been rendered inscrutable by what seems to be a veil-like cloth draped over a mask. Equally mysterious is the object clutched in the figure's right hand. Is it a cardboard sword? The uncertainty this picture engenders makes it one of Levitt's most surreal photographs. Comparison with variants from adjacent frames shows that Levitt performed a significant act of cropping in order to heighten the picture's enigmatic quality.<sup>190</sup> She eliminated the giggling playmates who stood beside the shrouded form, and whose presence utterly changes the mood.

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<sup>189</sup> Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. (The Beacon Press, Boston: 1955), p. 12.

<sup>190</sup> Sandra S. Phillips discusses Levitt's habit of cropping her photographs in her early years in "Helen Levitt's Cropping," *History of Photography*, 17, Spring 1993, p.121-125. The three different variants seem to represent three different frames, rather than a single negative, but I cannot say for sure, as Levitt did not share her negatives with me. I have only seen these in the form of prints.

That is to say, she stripped away the figure's human community, the implied narrative that would give it a logic—"these are kids playing dress up"—and the tone of fun that the playmates once gave to the picture. Levitt chose to print the picture in a way that would heighten the seriousness of play, emphasizing its identity as a strange rite rather than an innocuous game.

Levitt seems to have sought out and prized such scenes of masquerade, though they must not have been easy to come by, except on Halloween. She repeated the motif on at least five other occasions. There is, for instance, the brilliant scene of three children assembled on a stoop like courtiers attending a masked ball, which dates to 1939 and about which I will say more. Later, she would photograph a boy perched on a banister ornament who wields both an aggressively pointed gun and a white mask that contrasts with his dark skin (fig. 2.40). In this case, too, Levitt choose to crop out the masker's more ordinary-looking companion in order to ratchet up the sense of mystery (2.41). The picture was printed in the 1965 *A Way of Seeing* in such a radically cropped form that the mask-wearer appears to fly above the stoop. Perhaps most revealingly, there is a picture in the special collection of the New York Public Library that was printed from a segment of Levitt's film *In the Street*, much of which was clearly shot on Halloween (fig. 2.42), and which is discussed in chapter three.

I take these scenes of masquerade to have had the force of a revelation for Levitt; they strike me as being definitive discoveries. In positioning these pictures as a series alongside the evidence of their variants, it seems to me that we glimpse Levitt shifting her mentality toward photography. She figures out that instead of *finding* interesting "material" to "document," she needs to actively construct the reality framed by her lens. That might entail something as simple as shifting her physical orientation toward the scene, or performing a bold act of cropping, but it might also have meant discovering ways to interact with the children so as to encourage or even steer the unfolding of their dramas into photogenic configurations.

Whatever methods of interaction she may have improvised, it is clear that her impulse was not merely documentary. By 1938 – 1939, she had begun to look for moments when life uncannily resembles art—and more specifically, I would argue, the theatrical, performative arts of the stage and cinema. Most importantly, she has realized that the visual signs for artistry, performance, and theatricality depend upon the presentation of bodies in space. By 1938, Levitt had learned to orient her pictures around the active, moving body as a site of meaning.

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So far, I have sought to show that Levitt's attention to children and their play was by no means unique or even unusual at the time; on the contrary, she seems to have responded to a widespread interest in the city child that was fostered by the Photo League, WPA/FAP reformist endeavors, and the examples of such noteworthy camera practitioners as Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and others. I have also aimed to demonstrate the ways in which Levitt's pictures of children defy the usual class-and-race conventions for representing slum children, by connecting Levitt's version of the entertaining vignette to the modern mores for picturing privileged children's play. The result is an account of Levitt's vision as a hybrid of many competing ideas about photography, from the political to the popular to the avant-garde vision of Cartier-Bresson. That is to say, multiple streams of photographic production converged by 1938 to direct Levitt towards children's play as a subject worthy of investigation, from the heightened attention to

urban childhood so pervasive in ethnographic or reformist photography to the surrealist interest in the child as a primitive other. She assembled her way of working from an array of photographic modes, but knowing this does not tell us what she made out of that inherited material—that is, how she transformed the models from which she drew. For the pictures she made of children’s play do not, I believe, fit snugly into any of the categories that we have examined thus far. They synthesize many of the concerns respective to each way of working—the material texture of working-class life, the elements of danger and pleasure in play, the pursuit of the fantastic realms of objective chance—but ultimately, as a series, Levitt’s vision of play charts a distinctive territory beyond those received parameters. The precise makeup of that distinctive territory is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

## II. Photography as performance, play as theater

...let us not forget the profound link that has always existed between theatre, acting, and life itself...You need only watch a child to realize that whatever it says is intended to influence you, to obtain a specific result from you, and must therefore be understood in terms of yourself [the adult], the moment in time, and the intention; it is the very essence of childhood: a weak being seeking to get results from stronger beings whom he sees as being terrible, grandiose, powerful...and ridiculous.

Henri Lefebvre, p. 135 *The Critique of Everyday Life*

Does photography belong to the realm of visual art, or is it a species of theatrical performance, distilled and preserved for extended viewing? Using the interacting mechanisms of lens, camera, and chemistry to coalesce a picture, the photographer produces an iconic sign from the flux of life. At the same time, the resulting picture is a record or trace of actions performed before the lens: an index of an event that transpired in time and space.

For all its connections to the traditions of pictorial art, photography has long been shaped by a deep kinship to performance and theater. Those links go back to the medium’s very inception: Louis Daguerre, one of the key co-inventors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s new automated picture-making systems, made his living staging elaborate theatrical spectacles for Parisian audiences. And the photographic parlors or studios that sprang up after 1839 were stage-like spaces in which to contrive and record intimate performances. From the costumes carefully selected to signal character and social status, to the gestures displayed self-consciously before the camera, having one’s photographic portrait made has always been a thoroughly theatrical affair.<sup>191</sup>

Over the course of photography’s history, a significant number of the medium’s most adventurous practitioners have played, self-consciously, with the fertile overlap between photography, performance, and theatricality. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Countess of Castiglione staged dazzling studio performances intended to live on as photographic mementos, while Julia Margaret Cameron corralled her friends and family to participate in fanciful performative allegories. The legacy of their work is vividly present in today’s photography, especially in the

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<sup>191</sup> To be sure, there is an important difference between photographic theatricality and traditional theater, including the reduction and dispersal (or concentration) of the audience. I thank Anne Wagner for helping to clarify this point.

self-consciously directorial mode<sup>192</sup> that came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s, as exemplified by the carefully crafted tableaux of Jeff Wall.

Looking carefully at Levitt's early street pictures, we find—surprisingly—that she also used the camera to play with performance and theatricality. I say “surprisingly” because from one vantage point, Levitt's work can seem resolutely anti-theatrical. Since her debut exhibition in 1943, critics have found her pictures to be “honest and forthright.”<sup>193</sup> These terms of praise oppose the negative connotations of theatricality as that which is “marked by exaggerated self-display and unnatural behavior; affectedly dramatic.”<sup>194</sup> As is frequently noted, Levitt's pictures often have the air of something found rather than constructed. This is how photography critic Edna Bennett put it in 1943:

A photographer who works as Helen Levitt does was born with the soul of a beachcomber—one who is always seeking, never leaving a stone unturned for here the hidden treasure might be found. And finding it—keen delight, effervescent emotion, or quiet appreciation—and then on with the search.<sup>195</sup>

A further point against calling Levitt's work theatrical is her extraordinary ability to “seize the unforeseen and the quick,”<sup>196</sup> which would seem to exclude any directorial orientation or conscious control on her part. Indeed, one critic writing in 1944 praised Levitt's photographs for being “distinguished by their undeniable realism—by their presentation of truth unadorned.”<sup>197</sup> Perhaps most importantly, virtually all of Levitt's important pictures take place not in the artificial environment of the studio interior but in the exterior space of the city streets, the place where (according to a certain tradition of street photography) real life is supposed to rule.

Yet the witty reversal inherent in Levitt's work is that real life turns out to be a matter of performance and masquerade, of costumes and poses, of playing games and inhabiting fantasies. This, I believe, is why the pictures of children's play stand out as the definitive contribution of her career. Photographing children's play gave her the means to investigate the interplay between reality and theatricality, fact and fantasy, authenticity and artifice.

Indeed, for all the discussion of Levitt's “undeniable realism” and her “presentation of truth unadorned,” a competing line of written response has found it necessary to think about theater and performance in relation to Levitt's work. The most formidable and influential voice in this regard has been James Agee's. In the preface he wrote for Levitt's 1965 photo book, *A Way of Seeing*,<sup>198</sup> Agee summed up the cumulative effects of the pictures as revealing, to his

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<sup>192</sup> A.D. Coleman coined the term the directorial mode in his influential essay “The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition,” reprinted in Vicki Goldberg, *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

<sup>193</sup> Edna Bennett, “Helen Levitt's Photographs: Children of New York and Mexico,” *U.S. Camera* May 1943, vol. 6 #4 p.14.

<sup>194</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, 2d College Edition.

<sup>195</sup> Bennett, op. cit. p.14.

<sup>196</sup> James Thrall Soby, “The Art of Poetic Accident: Photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt,” *Minicam* March 1943, p. 28.

<sup>197</sup> Lorraine G. Freimann, “Photo Display at Art Museum Considered Outstanding Exhibit,” *Fort Wayne, Indiana Journal Gazette*, March 19, 1944. Press clipping in the Museum of Modern Art Archives, CE II.1.46.2.

<sup>198</sup> Max Kozloff explains that Agee's essay was written in 1945 but the book was delayed until 1965 in footnote 3 to his essay, “A Way of Seeing and the Act of Touching: Helen Levitt's Photographs of the Forties” in *The Privileged Eye*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987). He writes: “The initial book was to be brought out by

mind, that the great preoccupations of Levitt's subjects "are few, primordial, and royal, being those of hunting, war, art, theater, and dancing."<sup>199</sup> Nor was this statement Agee's only moment of pointing to the theatricality so vividly present in many of Levitt's most persuasive pictures. Earlier he had proffered a similar comment. In 1945-46, Agee penned a prologue for the film *In the Street* (discussed in chapter three), created through the collaboration of Levitt and her friend and patron Janice Loeb—with brief participation by Agee, who also shot some footage. The overarching point he perceived in the film's kaleidoscope of urban images is the sense that:

The streets of the poor quarters of the great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground. There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, a dancer: and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence. The attempt in this short film is to capture this image.

Following Agee, contemporary critics such as Ellen Handy have made special note that "The theatrical battlegrounds Agee describes form the setting for much of Levitt's work in photography and film." Similarly, Andrea Henkens observes that Levitt resolved a "vision of street life in New York poor and working-class districts that recalls the urban versions of a fantastic world, a place loaded with theatricality."<sup>200</sup>

Ultimately, Levitt's pictures present us with a paradox, one that the novelist and essayist Francine Prose insightfully discerned when she declared, "What keeps snagging [Levitt's] attention is a sort of paradoxically unself-conscious theatricality."<sup>201</sup> This paradoxical oscillation between un-self-consciousness and theatricality is one of the key elements that distinguish Levitt's photographs of children's play in the city streets from more conventional views of the street child the predominated at the time.

Consider, as a prime case study, the photograph reproduced in figure 2.43. Who are these strangely ceremonial children who stand in such solemn and graceful postures on a city stoop? Through its capacity to stop time and its powers of realism, the photograph makes this trio of youngsters abundantly available for inspection. The details and textures of the scene have been transcribed into gradations of light and shadow with such precision, completeness, and fidelity to fact that one cannot help but recall the astonishment 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences experienced when they saw early daguerreotypes. They took out their magnifying glasses, so the scholars tell us, and marveled to be able to count the bricks in a building, or the stitches on a satin-trimmed bodice.<sup>202</sup>

Yet for all the wondrous cataloguing of material fact—the rolled socks drooping at the ankle, the scuffed shoes, the pockmarks on the brownstone's ornate columns, the reflections wavering in the window—Levitt's photograph makes the three children appear oddly remote.

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Reynolds and Hitchcock in the forties, but was shelved when one of the partners died. Helen Levitt states that she thought little more about the project for twenty years, until it was suggested that Viking produce it."

<sup>199</sup> Helen Levitt and James Agee, *A Way of Seeing*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1981) p.75

<sup>200</sup> Andrea Henkens. *Flanerie in der Grossstadt: Auf der Suche nach dem Anderen im Alltäglichen: Surreale Blickweisen in den Fotografien von Helen Levitt*. p.10

<sup>201</sup> Francine Prose, Introduction to Helen Levitt, *Crosstown: Helen Levitt*, (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2001), p.7.

<sup>202</sup> Miles Orvell discusses Edgar Allan Poe's pleasure in looking at photographs through a magnifying glass; Poe was fascinated to discern that "the daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands." Quoted in Orvell, *American Photography*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 19.

Partly that is a function of the masks that obscure their faces, but it also stems from the inexplicably aristocratic bearing of the girl and boy who stand poised, as their third companion dons her mask, surveying the urban scene from their elevated perch on a city stoop. Dated to 1939 (so current scholarship suggests), the photograph speaks in nuances of gesture, comportment, costume, placement, and action. These are the elements that transform the subjects from ordinary children into uncanny performers.

According to theorist Richard Schechner, "...any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance."<sup>203</sup> Moreover, performance as a category encompasses "practices, events, behaviors" rather than "objects or things." These seem to me useful propositions for thinking through the ways that Levitt began to incorporate a sense of performance into her vision of the city streets. Between 1938 and 1939, through her work photographing children's active play, she gradually came to focus on people not as inert objects in space, as she had done in 1936, but as the agents of actions, practices, events, behaviors. This subtle shift made it possible for her to conceptualize photography as a performative enterprise and the city streets as a theatrical realm. Levitt had known since her earliest foray into photography that she wanted to photograph people<sup>204</sup>, but the breakthrough into performance happened when she learned to photograph not people per se but what they do. That achievement rests on Levitt's ability to conceptualize the photograph as a field of action, a kind of kinetic theater.

Once, when I asked Levitt the difference between photographing children and adults, she said—succinctly and precisely—"One is a picture of people who are moving; the other is people who are still."<sup>205</sup> Her acute attention to the kinetic dimension of children's play, to the language of the active gesturing body, enabled her to orient her photography around action, practices, events, and behaviors. In a Guggenheim application that she typed up sometime between 1940 and 1941, she wrote "For the past year I have been photographing children's play in relation to New York street life." The Guggenheim record informs us of the dates when her interest in the theme surged and the fact that she recognized play as a phenomenon worthy of extended investigation. It tells us that by 1939, she had conceptualized children's play as an ongoing series, a distinct project, and a kind of extended visual essay.

Levitt began to infuse her street photography with signs of theatricality as she increasingly set her sights on forms of play that are demonstratively performative, including the wearing of costumes and masks, the act of dancing in the city streets, the waging of contests for strength or territory. Ultimately, though, she went beyond literal performances to introduce theatricality into her vision at three levels: through her selection of motifs, her framing of gesturing bodies, and her shaping of space. What Levitt learned to do between 1938 and 1940, I think, was to approach the photographic representation of play as a complex interweaving of active bodies and significant spaces.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.2

<sup>204</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 6.9.2009.

<sup>205</sup> As Tim Clark points out, this could perhaps also mean people still on the move toward identity versus people stilled inside their roles.

<sup>206</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg points out that Levitt's transition from children's drawings to their play required her to overcome a multitude of technical and aesthetic problems. To shift from documenting a graffiti scribbled on flat pavement to the highly mobile, three-dimensional spatial and temporal unfolding of children's active play required a large leap of technical skill and imaginative scope, "from the relative ease of copying a flat, unmoving picture to the daunting difficulty of making one from the fluid chaos of the urban scene." 1991 exhibition catalogue, op. cit. p.52.

In her quest to link everyday life and performance, Levitt often photographed literal performance events taking place in the city streets. For instance, she repeatedly photographed outbursts of dancing that happened to enliven the sidewalks. In the picture that she privately nicknamed Harlem Jitterbug, the neighbors have gathered around a group of children who are displaying their skill at the latest modern dance steps (figure 2.44). The picture aims, I think, to celebrate African-American vernacular culture, not to countenance the stereotype of the African-American entertainer, for here audience as well as performers meet on equal terms (though of course the photographer is a discreet interloper at the party). Levitt was acutely conscious of the politics of race, and her photograph of a young girl and boy's cross-racial pas de deux (fig. 2.45) is an idealizing vision of racial heterogeneity and the bodily equivalent of a wished-for polyphony. Another carnivalesque moment of hierarchies undone occurs in the photograph of a group of boys waltzing in a comically homosocial formation (figure 2.46).<sup>207</sup>

More subtly, though, Levitt was frequently able to heighten the quality of performance in children's play through her attentiveness to the semiotics of gesture and costume. At least three pictures from 1938-1940 present vivid examples. In figure 2.47, the scene is riddled with signs of contingency and flux: litter strewn across the ground, laundry waving from a line, a fast-moving boy exiting stage right in a blur of motion. But all of this randomness miraculously coheres around the central figure, and it does so because of the uncanny potency of his gesture, as he presses his hat to his heart like an actor reciting a soliloquy. The theatricality is even stronger in figure 2.48, partly because the boys have contrived their own homemade version of a foreign legion hat—a rudimentary costume—but also because the vaudevillian gestures are brought so vividly close, as if they might reach out of the space of the picture to jostle us.

Costume functions alongside gesture in the scene of three boys cross-dressing (presumably on Halloween, fig. 2.49). The humor radiates not only from their awkward yet effective production of a pseudo-femininity but also from their pleasure in their own outrageous transgression, which entails *performing* bodily gestures coded as feminine. In other photographs, Levitt recognized—and used her camera to point out—that everyday sartorial choices also constitute a version of a costume. Her work with children's performative play led her to frame adult behavior within theatrical terms as well. When Levitt photographs an ultra-chic blonde woman dressed in fur and high heels beside the 25 cents spaghetti dinner sign, she shows us that frippery is a version of costume, and that women too perform the feminine (fig. 2.50).

In all of these cases we have reviewed, as in many others that could be singled out, Levitt heightens the sense of performance through the way that she configures space. She materializes the notion of the city as a stage through her purposefully restricted urban geography. Starting in 1938-1939, Levitt began to organize a significant number of her pictures around threshold zones. Again and again, she positioned the action in relation to the stoop, the sidewalk, the curb, the window, or the enclosed vacant lot, using liminal space as her recurrent structuring architecture. This principle holds across numerous pictures. There is, for example, the view of a couple who stand watching, a study in contrasts of gender, size, and attitude, at the slightly ajar door of their apartment stoop (fig. 2.51). Similarly, there are “Two wild little girls,” as Levitt privately called fig. 2.52, who inhabit the aperture of a window frame. Three African-American boys appropriate a stairway as their imaginary hideout. Twice, Levitt photographs boys whose

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<sup>207</sup> Jan Christopher Horak links Levitt's work to “the concept of carnival” as developed in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, in “Seeing with One's Own Eyes,” *Making Images Move*, op. cit. p.146.

complex exchange of shame and consolation, estrangement and bonding, occurs in the in-between space of a threshold zone (fig. 2.53 & 2.54).

Moreover, Levitt frequently layered the sense of liminality by incorporating an internal frame that reflexively signals the photographic act of framing. Particularly vivid uses of such *repoussoirs* occur in the photograph of three maskers on the stoop and the warriors battling it out on the doorway lintel. In fact, the three maskers on the stoop presents a scene that is liminal three times over, for it consists of a set of wood-and-glass doors, a colonnaded portal, and a city stoop.

Each of these liminal spaces set off from the hustle and bustle of the city becomes a miniature theater, and the events that transpire within those micro-stages are intensely dramatic. Levitt's canny ability to construct the street as a space of display is further heightened by her persistently close attention to the ground plane of her pictures. By taking a low and close vantage point, she turns the ground plane into an active spatial element that mimics the floor of a stage. In the photograph of the masked boys and tree, the rubble-strewn ground occupies at least a third of the photograph's vertical expanse; coupled with the close-pressed walls and occluded windows, which render the exterior into a kind of shadowy interior, the space reads almost as a stage set. Likewise, in the photograph of boys battling it out on a doorway lintel, the excitingly dangerous platform functions as a makeshift stage within a larger stage setting. And in the picture of a girl and boy dancing in a display of cross-racial friendship, the relatively rare wide open expanse of asphalt ground provides a stage for their fleeting gesture, according it the significance of a theatrical event.

The importance of the ground plane to Levitt's theatrical effects becomes especially clear when comparing figure 2.43 to its unpublished variant, figure 2.55. Even if figure 2.55 were not blurred, it would lack the startling sense of theatrical performance that organizes figure 2.43, with its enclosed space of the stoop functioning as a stage and its young maskers performing gracefully for the camera. The sight of children wearing masks, in other words, may itself imply a quality of the theatrical, but Levitt seems to me to do more than record children who happen to be playing at masquerade. She configures the picture to imply that life is itself a form of theater.

Levitt knew well that a picture's meaning derives from the interplay of its content and form, or subject and style. In her words, it was a matter of combining "the right material" and "a proper shot." Or so she once put it in a conversation with me about a picture that had failed, in her view, to cohere (fig. 2.56): "the material was good, but I couldn't get a proper shot."<sup>208</sup> The picture in question contains all the elements one expects from a classic Levitt picture: there are three African-American boys using a stoop for their imaginative play; they have fashioned homemade costumes; they are enjoying the dangerous aggression of fantasy sword play. But they lack the vivid immediacy Levitt manages to effect in figure 2.43, which seems to actualize the absorptive suspension of disbelief essential to play, make believe, and theater.

That is to say, the formal and technical issues matter to the meaning Levitt constructs. There is, for instance, the important question of light. The bright noon light of figure 2.56 is uncharacteristic of Levitt's best pictures, for it introduces ordinary temporality, time as it can be gauged from the sun's position in the sky. Levitt preferred shooting "on the shady side of the street. It's better when it's not too bright."<sup>209</sup> And her most mysteriously effective pictures tend to have a distinctively shadowy chiaroscuro, a deep range of tones that Levitt deliberately cultivated, and which enables the picture to escape the time of the clock and calendar. A day of shooting usually began for Levitt with that act of checking on the light: "I'd say, 'I like the

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<sup>208</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2008.

<sup>209</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.



light—nice light, gray, no sun. Or sun—all right, but I’d shoot on the shady side of the street.”<sup>210</sup> With the light and shadows modulated evenly across the picture, foreground, middle ground and background blend together to function as a backdrop to the players, heightening the sense that theater and life have fused. Consider the vivid immediacy Levitt manages to effect in figure 2.3, in which the photographer places the viewer right at the threshold of the game yet leaves its intensity undisturbed. The modulation of light and dark is as important here as it would be in a theatrical production.

My point is that Levitt did not merely *find* moments of performance. Certainly she took advantage of moments when overt performance is at issue, as in the three pictures she made of children dancing in the street. But she also shaped and edited her scenes to prompt viewers to read space as a stage, her subjects as gesturing characters, and the material contingencies of quotidian life as the semiotics of costume and comportment.

### A Proto-Goffman Point of View

For all their sense of snapshot immediacy, then, there is an exquisite purposefulness to Levitt’s formal decisions. She oriented her street photographs toward the representation of social life as a theatrical experience—a matter of performer and audience, of action and affect. In doing so, she anticipated and paralleled the insights of Erving Goffman, whose classic sociological study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* takes as its starting proposition a resonant remark by Robert Ezra Park:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.<sup>211</sup>

Admittedly, Goffman would not publish *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* until 1959, so I am not arguing for any kind of influence running from the sociologist to the photographer, or vice versa, though it is easy to believe that Goffman would have found Levitt’s work interesting. Rather, I am arguing that it is profitable to view Levitt’s work through Goffman’s lens, to apply his theorization of social interaction as organized around performances, costumes, stage-settings, and patterns of behavior to the vision of urban life she constructed.

As a case in point, consider Levitt’s photograph of two boys lounging on the banister of a stoop as they puff away at cigarettes (fig. 2.57). In a sense, the photograph presents to view what Goffman would call “the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several ways.”<sup>212</sup> Levitt’s picture places the realism of straight photography in the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid. The decision to use diffuse outdoor light or “open shade” as it is called had implications for both Levitt’s process and the look of the pictures she produced. In terms of process, it gave her the freedom to move and shift her position without worrying about changing light levels or abrupt contrast: “Diffused light outdoors, such as from an overcast sky, is soft and revealing. Similar lighting, called open shade, exists. For example, in the shade of a building, even on a sunny day, you can shoot from almost any position without the light on the subject or its apparent contrast changing.” *Photography 9<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Stone, Upton, and London. p232

<sup>211</sup> Robert Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), p.249 quoted in Erving Goffman, . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p.19.

<sup>212</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, op. cit., p.35

service of dissecting specific acts of social self-idealization, in which masculinity and race function as intersecting roles to play. The jaunty angle of a hat, the dangling placement of a cigarette, the studiously lowered eyelids: these are the details that Levitt points to affectionately and yet with a sly whisper of social critique. She knows that these young men-to-be are citing the ideal of the tough guy; by emphasizing the comically exaggerated-yet-effective portrayal of a certain movie-made, racialized masculinity, she insists both audience and performer are aware what is at stake is, fundamentally, a performance.

And Levitt uses repetition to hit the point home. Figure 2.57 is one of a number of photographs that pivot on the sight of African-American boys proudly displaying a certain fashion-conscious masculinity. There is, for instance, a vivid scene of young men pleased as punch to display themselves for an admiring street photographer.<sup>213</sup> The sixth plate in *A Way of Seeing* (figure 2.58) revels in the beauty of a young boy whose elegant clothes seem too adult for him (and maybe too large) but which he wears with consummate grace and confidence. His idealizing performance is both slightly off kilter and beautifully done. In yet another of Levitt's meditations on African American masculinity (figure 2.24), the gentle humor derives from the disjunction between the hard phallic gun as signifier of a threatening masculinity versus the luminously cherubic tenderness visible in the child's face. The slippage between the role as idealization and the more complicated reality generates a quiet pathos.

Levitt was not, like Goffman, a sociologist; she was a photographer whose work bridged the nascent hybridization of entertainment and art. The overlap between Levitt and Goffman resides in their shared concern for social life as the dance between a performative display and a scrutinizing observation. According to Goffman, when we enter the social realm, we are always either actors or audience, if not both at once. Levitt's photographs concur.

Let me suggest that Levitt's intuitions about the links between play and performance, theatricality and social life, are one of the key reasons her work stands out today as an exceptional episode in the history of photography. Her interest in using photography to portray social life was thoroughly of her time. Indeed, in the 1930s, the consensus held that the portrayal of "American social life in its sundry aspects" was the very *raison d'être* of photography.<sup>214</sup> But her insight that social life could best be construed as a ludic performance was remarkably vanguard. It speaks uncannily to today's critical interest in performance studies as a vital, if "essentially contested" area of inquiry.

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Levitt must have known that these new pictures were exciting and important, for in 1938 she used at least some of them to establish a new set of social relationships. Fortified by the professionalism she had developed at the Federal Art Project, she was "somehow not afraid"<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Adam Gopnik calls the picture "...an ideal fashion picture, a perfect study of a certain kind of hard-earned African-American slyness and hyper-awareness." Helen Levitt, *Here and There* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2003), p. 9-10.

<sup>214</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, "CAMERA: Aspects of America in Three Shows, *New York Times* October 2, 193, p.169. In this article, Jewell takes stock of the state of photography in 1938 by surveying three exhibitions then on view—Walker Evans's "American Photographs" at the Museum of Modern Art, John Albok's "Faces of the City" at the Museum of the City of New York, and "East Side, West Side" at the Federal Art Gallery. Jewell concludes that for all the diversity of approaches to the camera revealed in these shows, the work is united by the effort to portray "American life in sundry social aspects."

<sup>215</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.27.08.

to seek out Walker Evans.<sup>216</sup> “I went to see him with my pictures...I wanted to get his opinion about what I was doing.”<sup>217</sup> The decision to solicit Evans’s opinion reflected Levitt’s growing ambition and confidence. As it happened, her visit to Evans’s 92<sup>nd</sup> street studio<sup>218</sup> would prove more fateful than she could have foreseen, for through him she was to meet two close friends, stalwart supporters, and important collaborators: the writer James Agee and the art historian and painter Janice Loeb (fig. 2.59). Together, Loeb and Agee promptly became the appreciative audience for whose eyes she began to shape her work.

On the day that Levitt visited Evans, “Jim [Agee] happened to come by.” It was a stroke of luck. Levitt later remembered Agee as displaying more enthusiasm for her pictures than Evans did: “Agee seemed to be interested in them more than Walker was...” Whether or not this memory is accurate, Levitt’s photographs would become “one of Agee’s great loves,”<sup>219</sup> and he would go on to write the introduction to her photo book, *A Way of Seeing*, a text that has left an indelible mark on Levitt criticism (as discussed in chapter four). He also encouraged her interest in film. In the fall of 1941 Agee became a film critic for *Time*,<sup>220</sup> and between 1945 and 1946 he would help Levitt to produce the notably experimental *In the Street*, her first film.

The importance of Levitt’s association with Agee and Evans is well known. For example, writers generally mention that Levitt helped Evans to prepare prints for his groundbreaking 1938 exhibition, *American Photographs*.<sup>221</sup> Levitt considered it “a great privilege to listen to him [Evans] and Agee talk,”<sup>222</sup> Evans was “funny...erudite...knew everything...” and Agee was “brilliant.”

But these celebrated male figures might have proved more intimidating than nurturing to Levitt were it not for the presence of Janice Loeb (fig. 2.59),<sup>223</sup> whom Levitt also happened to meet through Evans in 1939. (Both Loeb and Levitt had briefly dated Evans and bonded over their mutual dissatisfaction with his suitability as a beau.) The existing scholarship has not given sufficient credit to the instrumental role that Janice Loeb played in Levitt’s development as a photographer. It is no small detail that the dedication page of *A Way of Seeing* reads “To Janice.” Certainly Levitt considered Loeb one of the keys to her success, not least because she became the young photographer’s patron: “Janice supported me...it’s important to know I didn’t have to work and scramble to shoot in a hurry. I could go out and photograph when I felt like it.”<sup>224</sup> And she credits Loeb with more than direct financial support: “She had an eye. I learned a lot from

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<sup>216</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.27.08. Maria Morris Hambourg confirms that “In 1938 Levitt looked up Walker Evans and showed him her photographs.” op. cit. p.54

<sup>217</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 12.04.07.

<sup>218</sup> James Mellow, *Walker Evans*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), “A Way of Seeing,” p.383.

<sup>219</sup> Sandra Phillips op. cit. quotes Walker Evans recollection that “Levitt’s work was one of James Agee’s early loves; and in turn, Agee’s own magnificent eye was part of her early training.” p. 38.

<sup>220</sup> Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life*, (New York: Dutton, 1984), p.263.

<sup>221</sup> As Maria Morris Hambourg puts it: “Working close to Evans, and helping him with his exhibition “American Photographs” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938, was surely valuable. It sharpened Levitt’s consciousness of her distinctive vision and made her more attentive to the crop of her pictures. More important, Evans’s accomplishment, artistic stature, and web of colleagues and friends—especially James Agee and Janice Loeb—confirmed the value of her native standards of excellence. To accept their praise and become one of their group Levitt had to admit her maturity as an artist, as well as the possibility that her art might be worth their high regard.” p55.

<sup>222</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 6.12.2006.

<sup>223</sup> Indeed, in her memoir *Always Straight Ahead*, Alma Agee describes an awkward scene in which Helen Levitt tried to participate in a conversation between Agee and Delmore Schwartz, only to have Schwartz dismissively cut her off.

<sup>224</sup> 12.04.2007 interview. Levitt reiterated the importance of Loeb to her career during numerous interviews.

her eye—a trained eye. She did history of art at Vassar, worked for an art magazine in Europe.”<sup>225</sup> Most writers acknowledge Levitt’s connection to Agee, Cartier-Bresson, and Evans, but it is time to recognize that Loeb’s patronage, friendship, collaboration, and dialogue with Levitt contributed substantially to the photographer’s vision. Indeed, some of Levitt’s pictures might not have survived without her: “I didn’t care about print quality, and she didn’t either. When I put prints in the garbage, she’d pull them out and frame them.”<sup>226</sup>

Like Levitt, Janice Loeb was born in 1913 in New York City; unlike the photographer, Loeb came from a wealthy background and benefited from a stellar education, including extended time abroad in France and England.<sup>227</sup> Having graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar, Loeb was a contributing editor to the *Vassar Review* in 1935, where she published at least three thoughtful and sophisticated articles on art: “Notes on the Exhibition” in May 1934, “Surrealism” in the February 1935 issue, and “Pictures—Romantic and Otherwise” in the 1935 Commencement issue.<sup>228</sup> Loeb’s essays are rigorously analytic and impressively knowledgeable about the most contemporary aesthetic questions of their time. So it is no wonder that Alfred H. Barr hired her sometime between 1935 and 1936 to conduct research for the monumental 1936-37 MOMA exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*. Loeb spent time in Paris working with Barr,

...hunt[ing] for the fantastic or enigmatic prints that are needed to fill out the ‘antecedents’ of the show. She [spent] hours...in bookshops, at antiquaries, and along the quais, and at the end of each day show[ed] A. [Alfred Barr] her discoveries. Her enthusiastic, intellectual participation [made] her youthful presence exhilarating at the conclusion of a day beset with uncertainties.<sup>229</sup>

Crucially, Loeb had devoted much of her “enthusiastic, intellectual” talent to the question of surrealism. The evidence of the pictures shows that 1938-1939, the year when Levitt and Loeb discovered they were “cut from the same cloth,”<sup>230</sup> was also the year when Levitt’s vision of the street child became charged with a growing sense of the surrealist uncanny. It seems telling that Levitt’s print of Bosch’s *The Magician*, displayed prominently in her apartment all her life, was a gift from Loeb to Levitt.<sup>231</sup> The themes upon which the painting meditates—art and illusion, magic and play, audiences and performers, the mischief of curious children and the comic expressivity of the human form—had become abiding obsessions motivating Levitt’s newest phase of work.

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There is an intriguing slip of paper housed in the archive of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a piece of evidence left over from the 1991 Helen Levitt retrospective exhibition. It

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<sup>225</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 12.04.07.

<sup>226</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 12.04.07.

<sup>227</sup> “N.Y. Artist Fell in Love with Utah: Janice Loeb, 1913-2005,” obituary in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 21, 2005.

<sup>228</sup> I am grateful to Cassie Loeb Dippo for sharing these materials from her mother’s personal archive. Author interview with Loeb Dippo, 11.24.2009.

<sup>229</sup> Margaret Scolari Barr, “Our Campaign: Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Museum of Modern Art: A Biographical Chronicle of the Years 1930-1944,” *The New Criterion*: Summer 1987, p.23.

<sup>230</sup> Author interview with Cassie Loeb Dippo, 11.24.2009

<sup>231</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

is a photocopy of the typed application that Levitt prepared in 1940 or early 1941 to submit to the Guggenheim foundation, a request for a grant to travel with the ultimate purpose of producing “A book of photographs made in Mexico.” The typed statement preserves, across the span of elapsed time, clues to the way that Helen Levitt had begun to think about photography.

In describing for the Guggenheim committee her “Plans for Work,” Levitt wrote that she would need to “demonstrate in pictures of past work, more specifically than in words, the ‘style’ in which my work would be done.” Notice that she put quote marks around that troublesome term, ‘style.’ Levitt was finding it difficult to come up with a language adequate to the work she was doing; she announced that her work could only be explained in terms of what it was not: “Negatively I should describe this ‘style’ as non-pictorial and non-documentary.” She went on to elaborate a bit on what her work was not: it was not “objective,” not “sentimental,” and not “topical.”

It’s relatively easy to understand why she would have nothing to do with pictorialism. For an ambitious photographer working in 1940 or 1941, “pictorialism” would have connoted an antiquated and discredited artiness, a way of thinking about photography that insisted on beauty as the photograph’s ultimate purpose and the exquisite print as an object of delectation. Pictorialism as a vital aesthetic movement had exhausted itself in the pastoral fantasies of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie; its privileged point of view was antithetical to Levitt’s concern for the material texture of urban working-class life. Although pictorialism had its own ardor for child subjects—witness Clarence White’s 1911 *Ringtoss*—it tended to envision the child as angelic innocent. The child of pictorialism is the sheltered child who makes sacred the bourgeois doctrine of gendered “separate spheres,” in which the home is a sanctified space of untroubled harmony.

Less easy to decipher are the motivations and meanings behind Levitt’s pointed insistence on the “non-documentary” nature of her work. “Documentary” had become the reigning paradigm in American photographic culture during the 1930s. Its dominance as a term of praise and a framework for thinking about photography leads us to wonder: What might it have meant for Levitt to consciously set her work in opposition to the documentary photograph?

This question poses difficulties because of the vagueness and elasticity built into the term “documentary.” Scholars have had their work cut out for them in trying to pinpoint just what was meant in the 1930s by that oft-repeated appellation, which was found suitable to apply to cultural products ranging from films to theatrical productions and beyond. Within the medium of photography, documentary generally refers to work that proposes “a goal beyond the production of the fine print,” a goal that encompasses the revelation of social injustice and the shaping of public opinion:

...the documentary tradition...includes aspects of journalism, art, education, sociology, and history. Primarily, documentary was thought of as having a goal beyond the production of a fine print. The photographer’s goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change.<sup>232</sup>

As Derrick Price writes, the preponderance of documentary work that emerged in the 1930s “cast its subjects within a ‘social problem’ framework, and...argued for a politics of reform, and

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<sup>232</sup> Karin E. Becker, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 36

social education.”<sup>233</sup> In doing so, documentary expression seeks to stir emotion, possibly at the expense of critical thought, argues William Stott in his classic study, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*:

This is how documentary works...It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak...since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium...The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content.<sup>234</sup>

Important 1930s commentators on documentary as a photographic genre likewise emphasized the belief that “the facts themselves speak.” A good example is Lincoln Kirstein’s 1934 radio address on photography, which looked back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century to construct a lineage of documentary photography and praised Matthew Brady’s civil war photographs for “the esthetic overtone of naked, almost airless, factual truth, the distinction of suspended actuality, of objective immediacy not possible, even if desirable, in paint.” With the documentary photograph construed as “naked, almost airless, factual truth,” it could claim a special kind of authority that followed from its status outside the categories of art or commercial photography. According to Beaumont Newhall’s 1935 article “Documentary Approach to Photography,” published in the journal *Parnassus*,<sup>235</sup> the documentary photographer is “not a mere technician” nor an “artist for art’s sake” but someone who produces thoughtful reports in picture form. Newhall looks to the etymological origins of the word “documentary” to argue that such photographs are defined by their pedagogical purpose: “After all, is not this the root-meaning of the word ‘document’ (*docere*, ‘to teach’)?”

Documentary photography, then, can be defined as a whole cluster of attitudes and assumptions about objectivity, truthfulness, factuality, the production of knowledge, and the camera as a mechanical recording instrument. It generally refers to a socially concerned photography that combines truth claims—the credibility of the photograph as a purportedly unmediated medium—with appeals to emotion.<sup>236</sup> For Levitt, the goals of documentary—its ability to seem “objective,” its attraction to that which is “topical”—were at odds with the terrain that she had begun to explore. For between 1938 and 1940, she had become intensely interested not in facts but in fantasies, of a special and socially consequential kind. If documentary was usually a way to visualize the social realm, even a form of pictorial sociology—indeed, the term was often more specifically glossed as “social documentary,” and Roy Stryker’s Farm Security Administration photographers were famously characterized as being a “bunch of sociologists

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<sup>233</sup> Derrick Price, “Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography out and about” in Liz Wells, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.89.

<sup>234</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p14, quoted in Price, op. cit. p90.

<sup>235</sup> Beaumont Newhall, “Documentary Approach to Photography,” *Parnassus*, #4 vol. X April 1935. “The documentary photographer is not a mere technician. Nor is he an artist for art’s sake. His results are often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily they are pictorial reports. First and foremost he is a visualizer...”p.5

<sup>236</sup> Another useful voice in defining documentary is Mary Warner Marian’s; she writes “In a broad sense, all non-fictional representation, in books or in images is documentary. But during the 1930s, when the word ‘documentary’ came into broad usage, its meaning was more limited. Writers, filmmakers, and photographers produced a blend of Modernistic style and realistic subject matter, aimed at educating the public about the experience of hardship or injustice.” *Photography: A Cultural History 2d Edition* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006). p. 276

with cameras”—Levitt took a distinctively different approach to the idea of the social as the proper purview of the photographic investigation. Her photographs propose that social life is not a matter of sober facts but of masquerades, costumes, and everyday theatrical performances.

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This chapter has sought to show that Levitt’s turn toward children’s play was by no means an idiosyncratic choice. Instead, it grew out of a cultural context in which children were receiving heightened attention within multiple kinds of photographic production. Nevertheless, Levitt’s work stands apart from the more commonplace visions of the child because she focused so intently and inventively on the theatricality of city children’s play. In her concern for photography as theater, Levitt distanced herself from the documentary ethos that prevailed in the 1930s; she came to treat photographic space as a kind of latter-day *commedia dell’arte*, a quasi-surrealist vaudeville or picaresque play. That is to say, her pictures of play seek to be more than a straightforward record of urban children’s lives. They play with the conceit that the world is a stage, for Levitt was acutely attentive to the relationship between the moving body as the site of performative display and the 35 millimeter camera as an instrument of rapid-fire observation.

If Levitt’s photographic practice became itself increasingly theatrical and playful by 1940, as she moved away from the notion of photography as a straightforward record, the question then arises: What are the politics of these pictures? Does Levitt’s preoccupation with signs of artistry, performance, and theatricality, does her delight in the pleasures of play, imply that her photographs reject politics in favor of aesthetics? This is the question that I broach in the next chapter, which looks closely at the reception of Levitt’s work as her photographs made their way into magazines and then into the museum in the years from 1939 to 1943.

### Chapter 3: Levitt's Work in the Public Eye: The Politics of the Pictures, 1940-1945

The years 1940 to 1945 can be characterized as the peak of Helen Levitt's first career as a still photographer, as well as the beginning of her second career in film. Having synthesized her own approach to photography from a number of concurrent modes of thinking about the medium, she quickly gained public recognition in the two most important forums for viewing photographs: the new pictorial magazines that transformed visual culture beginning in the late 1930s, and the Museum of Modern Art, which established its photography department in 1940.

With her increasing public success and her new friendships with Loeb, Agee, and Evans, Levitt also began to expand her ambition as a photographer. The evidence of her 1940-1941 Guggenheim application suggests that she was deliberately seeking to move her photographic practice beyond the subject of children and their play, and even beyond the circumference of New York City.<sup>237</sup> On her typed application page she presented as her "PLAN OF WORK":

to make a book and an exhibition of the result of a year's work in Mexico. I have developed an approach to the photography of people and things in general that I want to apply to a nation and environment not my own.<sup>238</sup>

She was offering to test herself on unfamiliar ground, and she was in all likelihood positioning herself in relation both to Evans, whose book *American Photographs* had been published in 1938 to critical acclaim,<sup>239</sup> and to Cartier-Bresson, who had traveled from Europe to Mexico in 1934, where he stayed for approximately one year.<sup>240</sup> "I would never have decided to go to Mexico without Henri Cartier-Bresson's example."<sup>241</sup>

The Guggenheim application also required Levitt to articulate just what she had accomplished so far. Under the category "RECORD," she explained that she had "completed a collection of children's street chalk drawings on which I spent two years," and that "Publication of this collection is now being negotiated" (almost surely a reference to the March 2, 1941 portfolio of her work presented in *PM's Weekly* under the title "Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes On In the Minds of New York Children"). She implied that the chalk drawings represent a completed project, for she had moved on to a new phase of work: "For the past year I have been photographing children at play in relation to New York street life." But she also took care to claim a broader photographic territory than merely children, writing that "Mainly,

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<sup>237</sup> It is likely that her new friends and supporters James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Walker Evans encouraged her to apply for a Guggenheim; in 1937, Agee had himself submitted a wildly ambitious Guggenheim Fellowship application, which Alan Trachtenberg characterizes as "extraordinary and perhaps half-serious," considering that it listed almost fifty projects under the heading "Plans for Work," of which "Quite a bit of this work would be done in collaboration with Mr. Walker Evans." Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p.257. Evans also applied for (and received) a Guggenheim in 1940. Sarah Greenough explains that "...he was granted Guggenheim fellowships in 1940 and 1941, only the second photographer to be given that award" in Sarah Greenough, *Walker Evans: Subways and Streets*. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1991) p.16. See also p. 121.

<sup>238</sup> 1958 Guggenheim application typescript, SFMOMA Archives, Helen Levitt 1991 retrospective files

<sup>239</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, op. cit., p.245-256.

<sup>240</sup> Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson*, p.20.

<sup>241</sup> Agnes Sire and Tamara Corm, *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photography*, p.33.



however, my work is not categorical, and has consisted in miscellaneous pictures in Harlem, of gypsies, of pool-rooms, of prostitutes, and Bronx housewives.”

### “Miscellaneous Pictures in Harlem”

Harlem gypsies, pool-rooms, prostitutes, and Bronx housewives: it is a provocative list, one that calls to mind the marginal subjects that so fascinated Eugene Atget, French photographer of prostitutes, *zoniers*, and ragpickers, and his influential follower, Cartier-Bresson, who had photographed peasants and prostitutes in Mexico. Like Atget, Cartier-Bresson, and Evans (who photographed women of the streets in *Crime of Cuba*), Levitt recognized the potent alterity of marginalized places and peoples, of non-normative identities and unmapped subcultures, even as she was equally drawn to the everydayness of the Bronx housewife.

It is even possible to identify specific pictures Levitt likely had in mind in devising her list of representative subjects (figures 3.1-3.4). On August 11, 1940, the tabloid *PM* had published her “preoccupied woman with a garden hose” and identified the woman as a “housewife from the East Bronx.” And she had made a series of photographs of Gypsies, including at least three interior portraits taken with a 4 x 5 inch view camera borrowed from Evans (fig. 3.2a, 3.2c, and 3.2d).<sup>242</sup> Levitt’s list of subjects constitutes a bid to demonstrate her photographic range, professionalism, and ambition.

Nevertheless, the key word in her assertion of photographic versatility is surely *Harlem*. At the time, Harlem named much more than just another New York neighborhood. By the late 1930s, Harlem had become, according to scholar Sara Blair, a photographic “proving ground.”<sup>243</sup> And its status as a major site of photographic visualization had everything to do with it owning a legendary place in America’s class-and-race imaginary. As the 1939 *Federal Writers’ Project WPA Guide to New York City* put it:

...Harlem is a poor man’s land. Half a million persons are crowded into its three square miles—the largest single slum area in New York. The nondescript drabness of the streets is relieved by a chain of three ‘ribbon parks’ ... But the distinguishing features of the district are derived from its vivid population groups, with their national and racial cultures.<sup>244</sup>

Those “vivid population groups” constituted Levitt’s subjects. In particular, she preferred to photograph in the section of Harlem then called Spanish Harlem, where there were “living side by side Puerto Ricans, Cubans, American Negroes, West Indian Negroes, South Americans, and Mexicans.”<sup>245</sup> Whether she portrays a Gypsy family gathered on their front stoop or a circle of chic African-American women engrossed in conversation (figure 3.5), Levitt’s photographs repeatedly make visible the “racial” heterogeneity of New York’s working-class population. It is fair to say that she dedicated a substantial portion of her street photographs to the task of imaging the racialized Other—but how and why? What kinds of politics were at stake in Levitt’s decision to focus attention on the diverse demographics of working class life?

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<sup>242</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg, “Helen Levitt: A Life in Part,” *Helen Levitt*, p.55

<sup>243</sup> Sara Blair. *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photographs in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.6.

<sup>244</sup> *Federal Writers’ Project WPA Guide To New York City*, p.253-24

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.* p. 266

## “Vivid Population Groups”: The Politics of Levitt’s Pictures

In my conversations with her, Helen Levitt explained that she had initially been interested in a socially engaged photography—“How interesting, you weren’t just making good pictures, you were doing good”<sup>246</sup>—but that later, once she had befriended Walker Evans, “Walker disabused me of that.” Evans’s personal credo of “no politics” has been echoed in much of the key literature on Levitt. We have been taught by the authoritative scholars writing on her work that it is wholly free of political or social concern, that it is best understood as a disinterested art to be cherished for its lyrical beauty. For example, Sandra Phillips writes that “Levitt’s avoidance of social content is especially remarkable” considering her eye was shaped in the 1930s, when “the social consciousness that arose to rectify the problems of the Depression was reflected in American photography.”<sup>247</sup> She argues that we ought to see Levitt’s work as a “lyrical, rather than a social” account of the streets. Maria Morris Hambourg, writing in the same publication, makes a similar claim. She contrasts Levitt’s work with that of 1930s photographers Arnold Eagle, David Robbins, and Ben Shahn, who were motivated by an explicit concern for economic inequality and an allegiance to working class empowerment. Stressing the difference between Levitt’s work and theirs, Morris Hambourg concludes that Levitt’s pictures of children’s play offer viewers a “poem about freedom” rather than an indictment of “slum conditions” in New York City’s poorer neighborhoods:<sup>248</sup>

Because her subjects are largely poor, her disinterested purpose has been mistaken for social cause. But this artist is not working toward political ends; she is elucidating the collective and personal conditions that constitute existential truths.

Concurring with these writers, Andrea Henkens insists that “social or political intentions do not allow themselves to be drawn from these photos.”<sup>249</sup>

Yet this view may be too reductive. I want to propose that there are at least three grounds for calling it into question.

First, it asks us to overlook, discount, or minimize the significance of race, class, and gender as structuring elements of Levitt’s vision. It is hard to square the view that Levitt’s work is apolitical with a photograph like figure 3.6. More than a straightforward snapshot, it is a statement, channeled through the figure of two differently colored children dancing a comedic pas de deux, that racial mingling is not only possible but desirable, that it belongs as fundamentally to American culture as tennis shoes and vaudeville. To my eye, this photograph raises the possibility that, in the case of Levitt’s work, an opposition of the sociopolitical and the lyrical may be a false binary. Perhaps Levitt’s early work is most lyrical—or poetic, if by that word we mean both ‘inventive’ (*poiein*, to make) and ‘romantic’—in the subtlety of its race-and-class consciousness. Perhaps photographs like figure 3.6 remain durable because they so carefully refute simplistic stereotypes about life in what was then known as the Harlems, plural. That is to say, the politics of the work may inhere precisely in what critics are inclined to label

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<sup>246</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2008.

<sup>247</sup> Sandra S. Phillips, “Helen Levitt’s New York,” *Helen Levitt*, p. 15.

<sup>248</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.53.

<sup>249</sup> Henkens, *Flanerie in der Grossstadt*, p.10.

the works' lyricism (see chapter four for an extended discussion of how lyricism became a privileged epithet for describing Levitt's aesthetic).

Secondly, to claim that Levitt's work is apolitical because the artist was "not working toward political ends" is to rely on an unexamined intentional fallacy.<sup>250</sup> Regardless of her decision to follow Evans's lead and distance herself from political intentions, the fact remains that photographing the residents of Harlem was unavoidably implicated in the politics of race and class. The potential political readings of a picture are not defined solely by its maker's avowed intentions. Harlem circa 1940 was dense with the history of racial oppression and resistance. As the 1939 *Federal Writers' Project WPA Guide to New York City* explains, Harlem's streets constituted a site where "racial groups introduced their native flavors into the aging buildings of the district":

The old-world customs which the Italians brought with them from Sicily and Italy have succeeded in varying degrees in resisting assimilation into new ways of life. Negroes blended into their New York environment habits and qualities carried from the southern states, Africa, and the West Indies. The Spanish Harlemites reflect in their recreation, their public markets, and their changing social life, the traditions in which they were reared. Unfortunately, this native picturesqueness has in large part been preserved by extreme poverty, with its overcrowding, illiteracy, malnutrition, and social dislocation.<sup>251</sup>

As a pictorial archive of street life, Levitt's pictures give visual form to this tension between the "picturesqueness" of subcultures that "resist...assimilation" and the reality of "social dislocation."

Thirdly, while recent critics have emphasized Levitt's aesthetic achievement to the exclusion of political or social concern, the public reception of her work between 1939 and 1944 suggests that her pictures lent themselves to *both* political and aesthetic uses and interpretations. For the critics, viewers, and magazine editors who first brought her work to public attention, the pictures' claim to attention resided precisely in their ability to negotiate the tension between the beauty and the hardship of life in New York's working class districts, between the "picturesqueness" of racialized poverty and the awareness that it was inseparable from the oppression of "overcrowding, illiteracy, malnutrition, and social dislocation."

In chapter four, I go on to discuss some of the reasons why critics have overlooked the pictures' political dimension. For now, though, I propose to tease out the political implications of the pictures by looking carefully at the work's public appearances in magazines and museums between 1940 and 1945, the years when Levitt's work entered the public eye. My method foregrounds the circulation and use of the pictures over questions of authorial intention, for I am interested in the range of potential meanings that the photographs seemed to hold at the time. I start from the premise that we can only discern the politics at stake in the pictures if we pay attention to the heteronomy of photography as a reproductive medium. Easily cropped and reproduced, re-printed and positioned alongside alternate photographs, captioned and otherwise amended, photographs are thoroughly flexible and variable entities. Rather than enjoying a stable existence, they are volatile bits of matter. From the dynamic photochemical reaction that gives

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<sup>250</sup> See William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954). See also Barbara Herrnstein Smith "Contingencies of Value" in a special issue devoted to canons, *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September 1983).

<sup>251</sup> *Federal Writers' Project WPA Guide to New York City*, p.256.

rise to a photograph through to the moment of reception, they are subject to a range of transformations. They morph from negative to positive, from enlargement to final print; they circulate in all sorts of different spaces of display—juxtaposed with articles reporting the day’s news in tabloids and magazines, arranged as a cohesive artistic vision when sequenced within a carefully crafted photography book, or mounted and framed for viewing in a museum exhibition space.

Keeping in mind the flexibility of photography as a reproductive medium, in this chapter I revisit the ways in which her pictures were originally presented to the public in order to reconsider the political significance they may have possessed at the time. Certainly as encountered in the luxuriously produced Viking press book *A Way of Seeing* of 1965, with its belletristic essay by Agee, Levitt’s photographs can be read as “lyrical” objects of beauty that define an artist’s personal vision. But earlier, in 1939, when Levitt received her first opportunity to publish in *Fortune* magazine, her work was embedded in a portfolio of images and texts saturated by the politics of race, class, immigration, birthrates, and geography. A year later, in 1940, Levitt would have a suite of photographs published in the innovative tabloid *PM*. In the context of that lively and pugnacious journal, dedicated to championing “plain people” against the “people who push other people around,” Levitt’s photographs provided celebratory vignettes of working class life. A few years later, her work would get displayed on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art’s new photography department, where it would be glossed as the newest, most avant-garde phase of a modernist teleology of photography’s development as a distinct artistic medium. Importantly, though, even when viewed in the sanctified space of the museum, critics responded to them by articulating a sense that the politics of poverty and race mattered to Levitt’s vision, as I will discuss.

This chapter, then, examines the terms of Levitt’s early reception into the magazines and the museum. It weaves together a narrative of Levitt’s emergence into the public eye between 1940 and 1945 with an effort to unpack the political possibilities that various viewers have discerned within the pictures’ “lyrical beauty.”

### **1939: *Fortune* magazine and the politics of a “changing racial type”**

1939 was an important milestone in Helen Levitt’s nascent photographic career, for it was the year when she saw her first photograph published in a major magazine. Before Helen Levitt’s pictures were received into the world of art—indeed, before New York’s Museum of Modern Art had established a photography department—they found their first public forum in the pages of the photographically illustrated magazine. That is to say, Levitt’s work belonged first to the “beginnings of a full-blown image culture”<sup>252</sup> that emerged in the second half of the 1930s, when picture magazines began to reshape the American photographic landscape.<sup>253</sup> *Life* magazine burst on the market in 1936 purveying a wildly popular formula of visual entertainment oriented around picture stories. Its sensational success spawned a crop of competitors, including the rival *Look*, which debuted in 1937. If advanced photography in

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<sup>252</sup> Sara Blair, op. cit., p.7.

<sup>253</sup> Sandra Phillips writes that “The illustrated magazine came to the United States in the 1930s, and its most important manifestation was undoubtedly *Life*, founded in 1936.” op. cit. p.23 See also John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) and Marianne Fulton and Estelle Jussim, et. al. *Eyes of time: Photojournalism in America*, (Boston : Little, Brown: Published in association with the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1988).

America had once been the purview of a small coterie of elite enthusiasts—the key example being Alfred Stieglitz and his entourage of pictorialists, who in the first decades of the twentieth century rallied together to champion photography’s high-art credentials—in the 1930s the situation changed dramatically. The emergence of these new photographic general-interest magazines consolidated the medium’s status as a popular art form.

Within this competitive new world of the illustrated magazine that emerged in the 1930s in the United States, among “the most visually attractive, informed, and....adventurous” of the lot was *Fortune* magazine.<sup>254</sup> *Fortune* was more than a niche magazine for the elite class of wealthy business men (although it certainly was that); it was one of the brightest stars in Henry Luce’s publishing empire, which included *Time* magazine. It owed its stature in large part to the innovative editorial directorship of Ralph Ingersoll, who took a visionary—and highly visual—approach to crafting the magazine:

He insisted on many...photographs, dynamic drawings, and other graphics. He encouraged investigative reporting and in-depth treatment of individual firms, regardless of whether that led to a friendly or unfriendly analysis. *Fortune* was not to be filled with pro-business puff pieces. The talented crew that worked under Ingersoll’s direction included Dwight McDonald, Archibald MacLeish, James Agee, and Margaret Bourke-White.<sup>255</sup>

According to Sandra Phillips:

For about seven years *Fortune* was the most beautifully printed, elegant picture magazine in the United States, graced not only with a liberal number of color reproductions of specially commissioned art but with some of the best journalistic writing and photography around...<sup>256</sup>

In July of 1939, *Fortune* included one of Levitt’s photographs within its special issue dedicated to New York City (figure 3.7). The city was in the midst of hosting that year’s World’s Fair, and the magazine issue was designed to provide an in-depth guide introducing the metropolis to visitors. Indeed, the Table of Contents presented a quotation from Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia expressing his hopes that all the World’s Fair attendees will take the time to survey the ultimate exhibit: “The City of New York” itself.

Levitt’s photograph appeared within the section devoted to “The People” of the great metropolis, as one of numerous illustrations for an article titled “The Melting Pot.” Her picture shows a thin woman who leans forward out of her apartment window, with her daughter clinging shyly to her side. It occupies the center of the right hand page within a two-page array of portraits, credited to various photographers, taken in the streets of the city. With the pictures arranged in close proximity, often with their corners overlapping, the visual field conjures a Whitmanesque multitude and a palpable sense of the urban crowd. It also evokes the familiar format of a domestic photograph album, implying a structural analogy between the institution of the (patriarchal) family and the social totality. Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that children

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<sup>254</sup> Phillips, op. cit. p.23

<sup>255</sup> Paul Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism, 1940-1948*, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick New Jersey and London, 1997), p.13

<sup>256</sup> Phillips, op. cit. p.23

appear multiple times on this page—the three smiling girls at the upper left, the bashful daughter, and a curly-headed baby at the bottom center—for the text provides the conceptual fulcrum that ties these disparate images together: a discourse on racial difference and the emergence of a new “inter-racial type.” Captioned “It Takes Fifty Nations to Make a New Yorker,” the text weighs in on the racial heterogeneity that in the editor’s eyes marked New York as a preeminent site of Otherness:

Seventy-five years ago the Irish of New York, being the city’s poor, led the three-day insurrection known as the Draft Riots. In the politics of those days, the term “100% American” meant anti-Irish.... Seventy-five years from now the Magyar, Syrian, Czech, Polish, German, Jewish, Russian and other faces on this page will look as native to New York as the average Irish cop looks today. The New York born sons and daughters of immigrants already outnumber their parents and intermarry three times as often. Already the faces of any Coney Island subway crowd (below) betray the beginnings of an inter-racial type.

In looking back to this early moment of publication, we come face to face with what I have called above the heteronomy of photography—and with the politics that suffused Levitt’s work in certain key episodes of its reception. For in the context of the *Fortune* magazine layout, Levitt’s photograph cannot be interpreted simply as a moment of lyrical beauty, and its meaning is not reducible to what exists within the frame. It demands to be read in relation to all the other photographs that surround it, and the meaning it conveys is shaped by the adjacent text. Together, text and images prompt the viewer/reader to scan the photographed faces seeking clues about origins and identities. In a cagey and ambivalent tone, the text raises the specter of a class and a racial miscegenation by pointing to “the beginnings of an interracial type” detectable in “the faces of any Coney Island subway crowd.” It mobilizes the authority of statistics to describe a radical reorganization of urban demographics: “The New York-born sons and daughters of immigrants already outnumber their parents and intermarry three times as often.”

In other words, the text frames the pictures within a racialist discourse that is meant to speak to readers’ assumed anxieties about racial difference, immigration, and demographic change. Indeed, the article commences with a reproduction of Lewis Hine’s famous photograph of Ellis Island immigrants, given a caption that goes very much against the grain of Hine’s spirit: “the ragged regiments of Europe.” The writer’s conceit is that New York is “un-American” because it is filled with residents who have “queer names”:

To the real American there is one New York statistic that incontrovertibly isolates the city from the rest of the country: immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants who make up 31% of the population of the United States, make up 73% of the population of New York City.

Chillingly, the writer goes on to imagine how much smaller the city would be if each group designated as racially other—“Negroes, Russians, Italians, Irish, Germans, Polish,” etc.—were gone. Moreover, the concept of “race” in play in this moment conflates so-called “racial stock” with class destiny, for it identifies the following as a problem:

...the United States, having been created a republic by adventurous 18<sup>th</sup> century members of the emerging middle class, was inundated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by peasants and proletarians, most of them of different racial stock from their bourgeois predecessors. These peasants and proletarians have stopped coming, but they are still here...questions about their assimilation into a democratic system can still be asked with point today. A related question with the Negro remains...the most nearly insoluble of all our problems. Another, the Jew, has changed only in becoming more distressingly urgent.”

Let me clarify a point: I am not arguing that Levitt herself shared the views expressed by *Fortune's* writer. My conversations with her suggest she would have found them repugnant. Indeed, I will shortly discuss what I consider to be her racially progressive eye. Her best photographs tend to argue for the vitality, grace, and comradeship of groups then designated as “racially” distinct. But for now the point is that the signs of race and class were sufficiently legible in her work that it could be incorporated into a discourse on America as the Melting Pot. Within this article her view of the woman and child at the window (a motif that she would repeat on numerous occasions, as discussed in chapter four) belonged to the spectacle of racial difference, and the project of cataloguing that difference.

The Levitt photograph chosen for *Fortune* magazine, like the other pictures assembled alongside it, could function as illustrative evidence of a changing social reality because it skillfully abides by the codes of photographic realism. Presenting picturesque types to view with a startling quality of immediacy, they offer the illusion of direct encounter with the Other. In all of the pictures, the depicted figures fill the two-dimensional space so that the contingent details of clothes, hair, gesture, posture, expression are abundantly available for inspection. The photographs promise to yield knowledge from their effects of proximity, directness, and materiality. They invite an inspecting gaze through their rhetoric of uninflected clarity.

### **1940: Levitt's Debut at *PM***

In the case of Levitt's second important opportunity to publish in a major mass circulation magazine, race and class were also at issue—but those contentious social categories took on a radically different inflection, for in this instance her photographs served the needs of a very different kind of magazine, one that advanced a pugnacious left-liberal agenda and aimed to speak for and to an audience of ‘plain people’.

On August 11, 1940, the tabloid newspaper *PM* published eight Levitt photographs in its Sunday weekly edition, as specially featured photographs incorporated into the pages designated as “*PM's* Gallery.” Interestingly, in presenting the photographs to its readers, *PM* framed the portfolio of work as an introduction of a “new photographer;” the pictures were presented under the headline “In *PM's* Gallery: A New Photographer Discovers New York.” Even more interestingly, the text written to accompany the pictures explains that Levitt herself took the initiative to approach the editors with her portfolio; she had seen the kinds of photographs that this innovative new tabloid published and understood that it would make an appropriate forum for her work. As the accompanying caption tells it:

Three weeks ago we hung in your Picture Gallery photographs of plain people taken on the sidewalks of New York by a 22-year old Brooklyn boy. Hundreds of readers wrote

congratulatory letters, asked for more. One reader, a Brooklyn girl, brought in the pictures that we hang this week...

Levitt's decision to offer her work at the offices of *PM* surely reflects both her ambitiousness circa 1940 and her perspicacious recognition of *PM* as an especially important, innovative, and exciting new journal, which would prove to be a significant incubator of 1940s photographic culture. The anecdote suggests that she may not have always been as shy and retiring a figure as we have been led to believe.

At the time that Levitt brought her pictures to *PM*, the journal was scarcely a month old. Having sold its first issue on Tuesday, June 18, 1940, *PM* was both an offspring of *Fortune* and, strangely enough, its opposite in many respects.<sup>257</sup> It was the brainchild of Ralph Ingersoll, who had made *Fortune* such a success and who had persuaded Henry Luce to develop a weekly picture magazine—the massively popular *Life*.<sup>258</sup> Ingersoll had grown restless under Luce, not least because he had become interested in socialism, and as a staunch supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal policies was at odds with Luce's own anti-Roosevelt and anti-labor point of view.<sup>259</sup> Ingersoll's solution to his growing dissatisfaction with Luce was to embark on a daring new project: a daily newspaper that would “combine the photographic and artistic beauty of *Life* and *Fortune* with the stylishness of *The New Yorker* and the developing political commitments of Ralph Ingersoll to Roosevelt, labor, antifascism, and journalistic excellence.”<sup>260</sup> Most provocatively, that newspaper would offer two important innovations. To maintain its editorial integrity and political independence, it would refuse to accept any advertising.<sup>261</sup> And it would embrace photography's potential as a medium of mass communication, “presenting clearer and more vivid pictures to its daily audience than ever before or since.”<sup>262</sup>

*PM* provided a vital site for the display and discussion of what I would call a self-consciously popular photographic discourse. That is to say, photographs made their appearance in the journal not merely as illustrations accompanying news stories but as an independent focus of attention; moreover, they were conceived as a form of visual expression with intrinsic appeal to a general readership. In particular, the tabloid's extended Sunday edition, *PM's Weekly*, lavished space and editorial attention on series of photographs arranged into picture portfolios. Sections titled “News of Photography” and “PM's Gallery” were regular features, and they invited readers to think of photographs as themselves newsworthy events, rather than strictly as supplementary illustrations. The paper's photography editor was Ralph Steiner, himself a successful photographer and film-maker, who offered accessible yet thoughtful analyses of camera aesthetics. For example, on Sunday September 15, 1940, “News of Photography” reflected upon the fact that “The Way People React to a Camera Is Revealing” (p 48-49), while the December 22, 1940 (p 48-49) feature declared “This Is the Way To Take Fine Pictures of Children,” with Steiner counseling his readers:

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<sup>257</sup> Paul Milkman, *PM*, p.1.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.* p.13

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.* Milkman explains that the very success of *Life* so encouraged Luce that it prompted him to move Ingersoll from *Life* to *Time*, “a magazine Ingersoll had begun to detest. Luce's politics were reflected in *Time*. By 1937 these politics were anti-Roosevelt, anti-labor, in favor of appeasing the fascists in general, and particularly supportive of Franco's putsch in Spain.” p.13-14.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.* p.1

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* p.1



I've said it before, and I'm saying it again because it's the most important thing there is to say to photographers—the gospel that should be handed down from Mount Kodak: *Photographs things around you—things you know about and like—love—hate.*

And photograph the little, realistic things in a modest, realistic way—leave the 'big' EPIC approach alone. The modest subject and the direct, realistic approach are far more likely to produce a good photograph.

Levitt's pictures suggest that she understood and shared Steiner's conviction about the value of photographing the 'little realistic things in a modest, realistic way.' Indeed, although we have learned to think of Levitt as an admirer and emulator of Henri Cartier-Bresson (for good reason)—and thus as an exemplar of fine art photography—her vision was not circumscribed by the parameters of high art. On the contrary, it belonged very much within the ethos of popular photography that was championed by *PM*, as can be clearly seen by comparing her work with Morris Engel's "pictures of plain people" (figure 3.8).<sup>263</sup> Moreover, Levitt's commitment to portraying the everyday experience of working class life, and her quiet insistence on an inclusive vision of racial heterogeneity, surely deserve much of the credit for the enthusiasm with which her work was embraced at *PM*, a journal that dedicated itself to being "against the people who push other people around" and which was engaged in a concerted "crusade"<sup>264</sup> against racial discrimination.

It is worth pausing to consider how Levitt's work was framed and presented in *PM*, not least because as a major mass circulation publication it differed so markedly from *Fortune*. On the most basic level, the appearance of Levitt's work in *PM* was far more significant for the photographer's own career, for on this occasion her work received pride of place on the printed page, with eight of her photographs displayed across seven pages, and a full six out of the eight printed at full page size. In other words, the pictures were treated as a notable visual achievement, rather than as ancillary illustrations. Moreover, *PM* was a more congenial home for Levitt's work, I think, because its stance toward New York's racial diversity contrasted sharply with *Fortune*'s. Whereas the latter had mobilized photographs and text to exoticize New York as a site of racial otherness, *PM* invited its viewers to find pleasure in the very ordinariness of the racial heterogeneity that characterizes Levitt's cast of urban characters.

Consider, for example, the photograph selected to introduce Levitt's work and to enliven the all-important front page of *PM*'s Sunday supplement, *PM Weekly*: a close up portrait (3.9) of a young African-American boy who wields both a toy pistol and a half-eaten Popsicle. Here we have Levitt's recurrent conjunction of tenderness and threat (discussed in chapter two), along with a caption that stresses the photograph's understated humor: "This one illustrates the old conflict between desire for adventure and desire to gratify bodily wants." Despite the lightness of the editorial tone, and of Levitt's touch, there is something serious going on here: Levitt is

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<sup>263</sup> "PM's Gallery Presents New Yorkers—Unposed Portraits," *PM's Weekly*, July 21, 1940, p.33-39.

<sup>264</sup> Milkman devotes a fascinating chapter to *PM*'s "Crusading Against Prejudice," writing that "committed by its perspective to being 'against people who push other people around' and to fighting against religious and racial prejudice, *PM* distinguished itself as a champion of the victims of bigotry abroad and in the United States. The paper's writers interpreted Roosevelt's 'common man' rhetoric as promising a nation without discrimination or ethnic violence. With the same vigor the newspaper brought to its wars against consumer fraud, fascism, and labor exploitation, *PM* proclaimed its egalitarian principles, sought out and exposed enemies, enumerated the grievances of the abused, and crusaded for justice. The staff believed that racism was not only a violation of the spirit of democracy but was also an echo of the fascist menace imperiling world civilization." *op cit.* p.146

depicting everyday African-American life with an affection and modesty that evades the discourses of domination and control. To be sure, her photograph does place the sitter between various tropes of male, and African-American life—between boyhood recreation and future violence, self-gratification and danger. Yet the portrayal of the child's individuality unsettles those stereotypes. This is hardly an insignificant or politically neutral achievement, for it was rare in 1940 to encounter mainstream newspaper photographs of African-American youth that neither caricature nor sensationalize their subjects. Indeed, it seems to me that the photograph (and its supporting captions) purposefully refute what cultural critic bell hooks has termed the "white supremacist gaze."<sup>265</sup>

To support this claim, let me draw your attention to a photographic essay that appeared just a few months earlier in the popular picture magazine *Look*. On May 7, 1940, *Look* published an array of photographs drawn from the Photo League's ambitious Harlem Document project, linking the photographic representation of Harlem's youth to Richard Wright's recent best seller *Native Son*. Titled "244,000 Native Sons," the assemblage of photographs and text purported to explain the link between crime and environment: "Bigger Thomas, tragic hero of 'Native Son,' was a victim of environment. Here, in a study of Harlem, LOOK portrays the kind of environment that produced him."<sup>266</sup> In keeping with this framing notion, the article featured a subsection titled "Harlem Delinquents in the Making," which fused popularized child psychology (discussed in chapter 2, "the reformist vision") with a liberal critique of racial injustice:

Every child, no matter how fortunate, finds it hard to adjust himself to his environment. The Harlem child finds it doubly hard. His problem is complicated by poverty and race discrimination.

The one generates a desire for betterment; the other kills opportunities to fulfill the desire. As the Harlem youth matures and discovers his social plight, he may accept it or fight against it. To accept is deeply humiliating; to fight is to court trouble, for the odds are against him.

Despite the relatively progressive critique of racial discrimination on offer in these sentences, the formal structure of the accompanying photograph (figure 3.10) reads disturbingly like a mug shot or criminal line-up. With its blunt frontality, it casts a cold eye on its five young African-American boys, who are literally crowded into the pictorial frame, as if physically demonstrating the infamous crowding caused by Harlem's inadequate housing stock. The three central boys' bodies slump in dejection, and they are further objectified by the caption, which labels them "FIVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS" and repeats the word "they" in a portentous rhythm as if to seal their fate:

These are typical Harlem boys. They have survived Harlem's infant mortality threat which kills one of every 20 in early childhood. They go to one of Harlem's 23 schools, where according to teachers, their aptitude varies directly with their health. They play in Harlem's streets which have the highest accident rate in the city (there are few playgrounds, only one Y.M.C.A.) They don't know that they will probably be living within Harlem's boundaries for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>265</sup> bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 1994).

<sup>266</sup> "244,000 Native Sons," *Look* May 21, 1940, p. 9 – 13.

The avowed intent to expose injustice is thus undermined, or at least severely limited, by the visual rhetoric of criminality, through which racism is reactivated by the “repressive pole” of photographic visualization.

Even so, keeping in mind Roland Barthes’ lesson that photographs are unruly objects, unfixed in their potential meanings, it is also worth noting how that rhetoric of criminality is itself partially undone by the wonderful expressions of the two boys who sit at the outer edges of the picture frame. The leftmost boy beams with a singular beatitude, and the bemused grin and folded arms of the boy at right also incorporates a certain radiant, resistant energy within the otherwise heavy-handed rhetoric of the photograph.

The unexpected note of liveliness at the edges of LOOK’s photograph perhaps holds a clue to Levitt’s extraordinary care in handling the task of regarding subjects elsewhere depicted as a racialized other: she seems to have repeatedly conceptualized her street photographs as a form of portraiture. She informed me that in her early years she had endeavored to “give portrait photography a try” and took portraits of all her relatives using a 4 x 5 camera.<sup>267</sup> It is no coincidence that her 1943 one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art included “Portraits” as one of the show’s seven thematic groupings. Moreover, her skill as a portraitist involved, I think, her sensitivity to subjects who are experiencing a transitional moment, a moment when their faces and bodies register a complex response to an unfolding situation. And one of the ways in which her photos are anti-racist is in the honorific mode of portraiture that she practices.<sup>268</sup>

Consider, for example, the other photographs that were included in *PM*’s introductory portfolio of Levitt’s work<sup>269</sup>. Page 34 presents what I would call a portrait of a family group out for their Sunday stroll (figure 3.11). Like much portraiture, the photograph stakes a great deal on its subjects’ sartorial self-fashioning. (The caption reads: “One Sunday morning the photographer found this parade of neat and identically dressed little girls, one more curious than the rest.”) The facing page photo, the “Bronx housewife,” is even more directly a full-length portrait, as it centers the gaze on its subject’s patterned dress and starkly contrasting jacket, picturesque hat, sturdy work boots, and comically distracted bearing. The three portraits arrayed together on pages 36-37 all portray self-possessed individuals in their environment with a lively descriptiveness. It is worth pointing out once again the deftness and subtlety with which Levitt—and her editors at *PM*—embrace the racial heterogeneity of Harlem’s urban streets. These pictures seem to me not so much to reject the political or the social as to stage a delicate alternative to the kinds of racially divisive rhetoric we saw in *Fortune* and *Look* magazines. The final two photographs (figure 3.13) printed in Levitt’s *PM* portfolio are not portraits per se, but they acquire much of their potency from Levitt’s ability to incorporate the individualism of the portrait subject into the drama of a street scene. There is a portrait-like specificity to each child

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<sup>267</sup> Author (telephone) interview with Levitt, 12.24.2007. In her words, she “didn’t know what to do” when she was young and “thought she’d give portrait photography a try,” but she did not “enjoy the portrait work as much as street photography.” It is interesting to recall that Dorothea was another important photographer of the 1930s who applied the lessons of portraiture to photography done in the field.

<sup>268</sup> John Tagg distinguishes the “honorific” versus the “repressive” poles of photographic visualization in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). My argument is that Levitt applies an honorific mode of street portraiture to subjects usually represented in a repressive mode.

<sup>269</sup> One of the reasons I pause to inventory these pages is that some of these pictures appear to have been lost, namely the boy with popsicle and gun, the strolling family, and the girl reading on the banister.

who absorbs the shocking fact of the dead cat; the children are not treated as racialized types but as specific persons possessing a complex and thoroughly aware subjectivity. Levitt's subjects resist being read simply as types. To push toward the action portrait, I am saying, was the means she found to sidestep the problematic racializing effects of the type.

### **Levitt as Portraitist**

There may be a connection between Levitt's impromptu street portraits and the surreptitious subway portraits that were occupying Walker Evans at this time. Between 1938 and 1941, Evans dedicated himself to the project of photographing New York City subway passengers, using a 35 millimeter camera concealed beneath his overcoat.<sup>270</sup> We know that Levitt accompanied Evans on some of these underground photography expeditions, and Sandra Phillips speculates that "Levitt's use of indirection, of locating her subject in the right-angle viewfinder, must have aided him in appreciating the delicacy of these faces, unaware of the camera."<sup>271</sup> Yet Levitt's sense of portraiture is also radically different than that of her friend and colleague. She is not exclusively interested in the face as a locus of identity so much as the expressive, nonverbal language of the body. If Evans's subway portraits play upon the non-artistic, everyday form of the mug shot or identification photo, often isolating a single face in the photographic equivalent of a stare, Levitt's portraits are closer to the cinema still. They imply a larger narrative situation that continues beyond the frame of the individual picture. Whereas Evans's descent into the underworld of the subway's "swaying sweatbox"<sup>272</sup> produced images of deracination and fragmentation (two key properties of the photograph), Levitt's street pictures present us with scenes of community, bonding, and interrelationship. Her streets and sidewalks tend to be a resting place and a meeting ground; the space itself invites a different kind of consciousness than that of the subway's peculiar nowhere space. Levitt's photographic street portraits suggest that individual selves are constituted within a community of others—hence the preponderance of double portraits in her work (figure 3.14 and 3.15). Revealingly, when Levitt was to embark on her own series of subway and bus portraits in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>273</sup> she would repeatedly show passengers in postures of intimacy.

### **“A Nation and An Environment Not My Own”: Levitt's Mexico Work**

As it happened, the Guggenheim Foundation declined to grant Levitt a fellowship for 1941—it would not be until 1959 that she would win that particular award. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1941 she embarked on a ship bound for Mexico in the company of James Agee's wife,

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<sup>270</sup> Sarah Greenough op. cit. explains his working method in detail: "With a 35 mm camera hidden under his coat—its lens poking out between the two buttons—Evans imposed a rigid structure on this work that is remarkable for its lack of control... He did not arrange his subjects or coach their expressions, he did not regulate the lighting, and he did not even look through the lens to determine what was in or out of the frame... With very few exceptions, he further confined himself to photographing only the people who happened to sit directly across from him." p.12

<sup>271</sup> Phillips, op. cit. p.37

<sup>272</sup> This is Evans's term, quoted in Greenough, op. cit. p.17

<sup>273</sup> Unfortunately, Levitt never gathered her subway pictures together into a book or theme exhibition. Some of them have been reproduced in her latest publications, including *Here and There* (New York: PowerHouse, 2003) and *Helen Levitt: Spectrum-International prize for photography of the Foundation of Lower Saxony, 2008, Sprengel Museum Hannover*. (New York: PowerHouse, 2008).

Alma, and their son, Joel. “I needed some kind of stimulation. I’d been walking around New York and wanted something different. I was very taken with the photos Henri did and wanted to see what I could do there.”<sup>274</sup>

The story of Levitt’s time in Mexico is expertly told in James Oles’s essay, “Helen Levitt’s Other City,” published in Levitt’s 1997 photo book *Mexico City*.<sup>275</sup> It is a story of Levitt finding Mexico an unexpectedly difficult, even ‘depressing’ place.<sup>276</sup> While her inspiration to work in Mexico had been sparked by Cartier-Bresson’s example—she owned a print of figure 3.16, the view of a family at repose in an umbrella’s shade, which the French photographer had presented to her as a gift—she did not perceive it as the exotic, somewhat romantic world he had conjured with his camera. Instead, Levitt was startled by the severity of the poverty she saw. “I used to take the trolley or bus to where people were living in sand mines—very strange things I’d never seen before... You never see anything like that here.”<sup>277</sup> She was also discomfited by the restrictive gendering of public leisure, as described by Maria Morris Hambourg in the 1991 exhibition catalogue:

In the *zocalo* (town square) of Veracruz she observed the girls walking in one circle one way, the boys in another circle the other way. This ritualized form of social behavior depressed her; it was wholly devoid of spontaneity and communicated no individual feeling. This ‘dance’ in no way intersected the kinetic language she instinctively knew—that intrinsic language of motions and emotions that was the principal resource of her art.<sup>278</sup>

Convinced that “Mexico City itself I was not good at photographing,”<sup>279</sup> Levitt spent the summer of 1941 building an archive of photographs taken mainly in the suburbs of Tacuba and Tacubaya. As Oles astutely points out, the pictures that Levitt made fit into none of the prevalent modes for representing Mexico that had congealed by 1941. Studiously avoiding the visual clichés of a timelessly picturesque rural world, she was “the only important visiting photographer of the first half of the century to confine herself to Mexico City itself.”<sup>280</sup> Yet she also refused to portray the city’s incipient modernization as a triumphal process of “sleek art deco office buildings...and newly paved streets.” Levitt’s pictures testify to the difficult contradictions at the heart of modernization; Oles writes, “In her [Mexico] photographs, modernization appears as a messy process, leaving awkward visual juxtapositions and even more awkward social repercussions in its wake.”

There is some overlap between Levitt’s New York and Mexico work. For example, even when working in “a nation and an environment not my own,” she remained committed to searching out people who contrive worlds of their own within the public space of the city streets. She continued to focus on liminality as a structuring principle, with much of the action taking place in the frame of a door or the transition zone of a curb. She also seems to have made a

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<sup>274</sup> 2.27.2008 author interview with Levitt.

<sup>275</sup> Helen Levitt and James Oles, *Helen Levitt: Mexico City*, (New York: Published by the Center for Documentary Studies in association with W.W. Norton & Co, 1997). A description of the trip is also available in Alma (Agee) Neumann’s 1993 memoir, *Always Straight Ahead*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>276</sup> Oles writes that upon “arriving in Veracruz...Levitt found the port depressing,” *ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>277</sup> 2.27.2008 author interview with Levitt.

<sup>278</sup> Hambourg, *op. cit.* p.56.

<sup>279</sup> Author interview with Levitt 2.27.2008.

<sup>280</sup> Oles, *op. cit.* p.12.

special effort to search out children's play, though a noticeably smaller proportion of the Mexico work is devoted to children. But there are also stark differences between her Mexico and New York photographs. Mostly absent from the Mexican work are the playfulness, levity, and wit that enliven her vision of New York working class life. The harsh poverty Levitt confronted in Mexico—children without shoes, beggars missing limbs—muffled her comic instincts. The resulting pictures are frequently somber, sometimes grotesque, and occasionally tragic.

Or so the *PM* photography editor Ralph Steiner seemed to think. When Levitt returned home, she saw six of her Mexico pictures published in *PM's Weekly* Sunday January 11, 1942 issue,<sup>281</sup> accompanied by a rather negative review authored by Steiner. He chose to critique the pictures' challenging, even troubling portrayals of Mexico even as he praised Levitt's inventiveness and skill as a photographer. It is worth looking closely at the terms Steiner mobilized to discuss the pictures, for the ambivalence he expressed towards Levitt's vision of Mexico has something to tell us about the beliefs, limits, and desires that determined the photographic representation of poverty in American culture circa 1942.

Steiner introduced Levitt's Mexican portfolio by offering her a backhanded compliment. Although he doubted that the Mexico pictures would be *liked* by *PM's* readers, they nevertheless proved that in the hands of someone as "sensitive" as Levitt, the mechanical medium of photography becomes suffused with "feeling":

Helen Levitt's Mexican pictures, whether you like them or not, give the lie to the longstanding complaint: that photography is a mechanical medium, incapable of expressing the artist's innermost feelings toward his subject.

Suppose Helen Levitt had been a painter, etcher, or sculptor instead of a photographer. I'm sure the art work she'd have done in Mexico wouldn't have been any more colored by her feelings and personality than are these photographs. Levitt's pictures of Mexico prove that when a photographer is sensitive her, or his, pictures will be expressive. The processes of interpretation and selection go on just as much in the minds of photographers as in the minds of any other kind of artist.

In crediting Levitt with the ability to infuse a personal vision into her pictures, Steiner stressed the difference between her work and the clichéd visions of Mexico as an exotic land of colorful types:

Most of the photographers who have brought pictures back from Mexico seem to have seen and photographed the country as if it were a movie set for a musical comedy and populated with quaintly dressed extras. All their pictures lack is Nelson Eddy togged out in velvet.

*But Levitt photographed Mexico just as realistically as she has photographed Harlem—as a place where life is grim to the point of weirdness.* [Emphasis added] Some of her Mexican pictures parallel her New York work. In Harlem she photographed a group of kids standing around looking at a dead cat; she brought back from Mexico a picture of a child sadly playing with her dead pet rabbit.

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<sup>281</sup> Oles records the fact that Levitt's "negatives were not even printed until her return to the United States" in *ibid.* p.18. *PM* showcased Levitt's Mexico works on January 11, 1942, p. 44-45 under the headline "What Mexico Is Depends On Who Sees It... To This Photographer, Mexico's a Pretty Grim Place."

The hinge between Steiner's two paragraphs presents us with an intriguing, and I think, telling phrase: the mark of Levitt's distinctiveness as a photographer, according to Steiner, is her insistence on seeing "realistically" the burden of poverty, which makes life "grim to the point of weirdness." This proposal links the Mexico and Harlem pictures within a shared point of view; it also indicates that for important viewers in the 1940s, Levitt's work did not read primarily as a "poem about freedom." Rather, the very strangeness of the work was the source of its social and political relevance. The pictures connoted the oppressiveness of class hierarchy when they were most disturbingly weird. All of which circles us back to the concept of a period eye, and reminds us to consider the possibility that Levitt's photographs signified differently in 1940, 1941, and 1942 than they have in the recent critical literature. They spoke more politically. Whereas recent critics have talked about a surrealist influence on Levitt as a matter of artistic sensibility, the "weirdness" that Steiner saw was not primarily an aesthetic inheritance. It was a function of poverty itself as Levitt's primary subject. Surrealism, that is, was not yet domesticated as a chapter within the history of art; it was still implicated within the realm of the political. And Levitt's pictures were political precisely when they were "realistic," "weird," and "grim."

At the same time, Steiner's critical review went on to suggest that Levitt had erred too much on the side of grimness in the Mexico pictures, and thus he implied there was a degree of difference between them and the Harlem work:

Levitt's Mexican pictures are all of Mexico City's slums. You can't deny that Levitt was privileged to photograph any aspect of Mexico she pleased, but you would have a case if you objected that slum pictures didn't tell the whole truth. Certainly in Mexico City's slums there must have been people who were happy—brimming over with life even though they were poor. That, almost without exception, she picked only sad people to photograph makes her a little too one-sided for my money.

In looking for the simple drama of poverty I think she missed a complex but far more exciting and magical drama: in spite of the poverty, slums are packed with more life than all your Park Avenues.

Steiner's complaint arises from his implicit sense of what "slum pictures" ought to be and do. They were supposed to "tell the whole truth," but that "truth" *must* include a sense of the poor's intrinsic vitality. They should point to class oppression, but they should also suggest the poor's ability to transcend that oppression. Steiner treats it as self-evident that there "must have been people who were happy;" no account of poverty would be adequate without a sense that the poor are "brimming over with life." Levitt had photographed "realistically," but it was somehow the wrong reality. For if reality was what photography was supposed to offer, that reality was always already constructed by notions of the proper character of poor people. To effect a proper political reading—of the poor as deprived but resilient, of the slums as "grim" but "brimming over with life"—Levitt should have tempered the "grimness" with a "more exciting and magical drama."

In other words, there were ideological limits, even in a self-consciously audacious newspaper like *PM*, to the ways in which poverty could be represented, accepted, and discussed in mainstream American visual culture circa 1942. There was a need to suggest the balance or interaction between the grimness and the vitality of the culture of the poor. This, apparently, Levitt had managed to do in Harlem, and perhaps nowhere more so than in her pictures of Harlem children, in which the evidence of hardship—ragged clothes, nowhere to play but the

dangerous city streets—nevertheless gives rise to scenes of enchantment, the way a flower might sprout in the sidewalk’s cracks. Levitt’s photographs were *successfully* political when they were temperate about the reality of poverty. The Mexico pictures failed to mingle pleasure with politics because they had lost that carefully calibrated balance between an evocation of poverty’s hardships and a view of the streets of the poor as a space of community, bonding, and interrelationship.

This becomes clear if we consider a bit more closely how the Mexico pictures appeared in *PM*. The six photographs were arrayed across two pages, and all were given detailed interpretive captions that extended the critique offered in Steiner’s main text (figure 3.17). Steiner selected four pictures that seemed to demonstrate what he considered to be the excessive “grimness” of Levitt’s response to Mexico, along with two at bottom right that offered a more amenable vision. The review and its accompanying portfolio of work thus doubled as one of Steiner’s didactic essays in photographic aesthetics. The two pictures on the left page hovered between the “extraordinary” and the “ugly.” Of the woman pouring rubbish into a garbage can under the watchful eye of a bony dog, Steiner wrote disapprovingly: “The anxious, just-can’t-wait look on the face of the scrawny, unhappy dog adds a strong measure of misery to this already ugly scene.” He was more willing to concede a certain potency in the photograph of two men silhouetted against a dirt hill and cloudy sky:

Two figures wrapped in serapes on a bleak hill in Mexico City are not the elements of an unusual picture unless they are seen in an unusual way. Here they make an extraordinary photograph filled with intense feeling of morbid gloom—a modern *Day of Doom* or *Road to Gethsemane*.

Most troubling for Steiner were the evocations of death and despair in the two photographs positioned at the top of the right hand page. The scene of a man sleeping in a seated woman’s lap was disturbingly pieta-like: “Levitt says these are just Mexicans lying down for their noon rest, but here they look as if the man were dead and his women grieving for him.” Most shocking of all was the unflinching look at extreme suffering displayed at the upper right: “Abnormal people always make dramatic subject matter, but this twisted and tortured beggar is *just* this side of being too horrible to photograph.” In other words, for Steiner, Levitt had come close to breaching the bounds of good taste in her readiness to represent the most destitute Mexicans as figures of abjection.

Steiner essentially used the occasion of reviewing the Mexico work to set down a prescription of what a properly “realistic”—i.e., tempered—portrayal of the poor would entail. The two Mexico photographs that Steiner deemed successful were printed at the bottom of the right hand page, with captions that explained the reasons they merited his approval. One was a group portrait of four denim clad boys grouped around their gesturing father; it successfully affirmed the racialist notion of Mexican peasantry as “poor but warm”: “In this picture of a proud father who wants his sons photographed, Levitt shows Mexicans as poor but warm, vital people, a welcome change.” Steiner offered unhesitant praise for the photograph of a man and woman reaching out to clasp hands in an awkward embrace; his caption declares that “The undoubtedly cheap wrist watch, the humorous and sweet affection between two people shines out in relief against their poor background.” These two pictures were praised for the reassurance they offered: the poor are comical and affectionate, proud and familial. This was the vein that, Steiner suggested, Levitt ought to keep mining.



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What exactly did this thoughtful review of the Mexico work mean for the direction Levitt was to take? Steiner had informed Levitt, in no uncertain terms, that producing photographs of the poor for public consumption required scrupulous tact; the photograph's putative power to expose unpleasant facts must not override the countervailing requirement that it provide the pleasures of entertainment and ideological consolation. (Was this possibly the moment when Levitt learned to distance her work from any overt politics?) In light of Steiner's critique, the unqualified success that the pictures of children garnered between 1942 and 1943 must have been a clear lesson. There is reason to believe that Levitt took the lesson to heart. When she reapplied for a Guggenheim in 1943, she no longer attempted to demonstrate her photographic merits on the basis of a broad field of work that was "not categorical"; she was now prepared to identify her vision of childhood as her signature effort and to propose that she would build on and extend that theme, stating as her plan for work, "To make a photographic record of children in New York City and other sections of the country, both urban and rural." The desire to try something new remains a motivation—the children she photographed would be "both urban and rural"—but she had come to recognize that her success was tied to the work with children.

Between 1940 and 1943, Levitt's pictures of Harlem children met with a very different kind of reception than had the Mexico work; the starkness of that difference cannot have escaped Levitt's notice. As early as 1940, the Museum of Modern Art had included her photograph of three masked children standing on a stoop in "Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics," an exhibition which helped to launch the museum's new photography department in December 1940.<sup>282</sup> There is good reason to surmise that her ties to Evans and Loeb, both of whom were well connected at MOMA, helped to bring her work to the attention of the museum. Nevertheless, considering that she had only been photographing "children at play in relation to New York street life" for about a year or so—and that the museum as a space for viewing photography was still a novel idea—the legitimation of her work by the taste-makers at the Museum of Modern Art must have been a heady experience indeed. Equally important, Levitt's pictures of children garnered a flurry of interest in the newest avant-garde journals in 1942 and 1943. Again, probably through Loeb's advocacy,<sup>283</sup> her work came to the attention of David Hare, who edited the avant-garde surrealist journal *VVV* with the participation of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst. The volume's first number, published in June of 1942, presented an essay by Roger Caillois, "The Myth of Secret Treasures in Childhood," illustrated by two Levitt photographs: the "Button to Secret Passage PRESS" chalk drawing and the maskers climbing a tree (see figure 2.1). On November 9, 1942, Charles Ford, publisher of the "little magazine" *View* sent a letter to Helen Levitt's 448 East 88<sup>th</sup> Street apartment:

Dear Miss Levitt: James Thrall Soby has spoken to me of your photographs with great enthusiasm – particularly of the ones of the Harlem children in Halloween costume... and the gypsies... I would like very much to see them for possible inclusion in our

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<sup>282</sup> Sandra Phillips, op. cit. p.41, footnote 32. MOMA exhibition 121, *Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics* ran from December 31, 1940 to January 12, 1941.  
[http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives\\_exhibition\\_history\\_list#1940](http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives_exhibition_history_list#1940), accessed August 29, 2010.

<sup>283</sup> Maria Morris Hambourg explains that Loeb "introduced Levitt to her European acquaintances, among them André Breton, Eugene Berman, and Luis Bunuel." op. cit. p.57

‘Americana Fantastica’ number which goes to press next week... Would it be convenient for you to come to tea here on Monday the 9<sup>th</sup> – say at 5? Please let me know – Plaza 3-7625 is the telephone – and if not then perhaps we could arrange another time. Sincerely, Charles Ford I did like so much the ones you had in VVV....<sup>284</sup>

Levitt likely did have tea with Ford, for two of her photographs were published in January of 1943 in *View*’s “American Fantastica” issue: the mysterious sword bearer (figure 2.38) and the child climbing the doorjamb of an abandoned tenement (figure 3.19)—not the gypsies. The pictures of children had more relevance to Ford’s interests, for the entire issue was suffused with an iconography of childhood and fantasy worlds. It was designed to showcase the work of Joseph Cornell, then on view at the Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century gallery.<sup>285</sup> Levitt’s photograph of the veiled child wielding a cardboard sword was captioned “Knight in Harlem” and presented opposite Cornell’s *Medici Slot Machine*.

The sophisticated editors of the surrealist-influenced little magazines mobilized different protocols of display than had the editors of *PM*. Whereas the latter tended to direct the viewer’s response with interpretive captions, the former incorporated only the most laconic of captions, (e.g., “Knight in Harlem”) or none at all. Instead of glossing what the picture denotes, as *PM* so liked to do, these avant-garde journals invited their viewers to linger on the enigmatic qualities of the photograph’s multiple connotations. In the pages of *View* and *VVV*, the photographs exist between the categories of art and document, implying both possibilities but settling into neither.

Indeed, the portion of Levitt’s work that deals with children’s play met with such success between 1942 and 1943, I contend, in part because it bridged the categories of the social and the surreal, the popular and the avant-garde. This was a moment of cultural flux, when the inculcation of a war “home front” mentality began to dissolve the social realist consensus that had dominated American culture in the 1930s. Particularly important for Levitt’s reception was the growing visibility of surrealism, as European refugees like André Breton came onto the New York cultural scene. One of the pivotal advocates of Levitt’s career—James Thrall Soby—was deeply involved with the impact of surrealism. Having been appointed to the Museum of Modern Art’s Acquisitions and Photography committees in November of 1940,<sup>286</sup> Soby composed a memo on June 3 of what was probably 1942<sup>287</sup> to Beaumont Newhall, the curator of the museum’s new photography department.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> SFMOMA Archives, Helen Levitt 1991 retrospective files.

<sup>285</sup> See Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p.199 for an explanation of how Charles Henry Ford arranged for “a new and clever plan to finance *View* by linking issues to Surrealist exhibitions in New York...,” under this plan the “Americana Fantastica” issue was arranged as a showcase for the Joseph Cornell exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s new Art of this Century gallery.

<sup>286</sup> See MOMA Archives finding aid to the James Thrall Soby papers, prepared by Rona Roob, January 1998, online at <http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/EAD/Sobyf>, accessed 8.20.2010.

<sup>287</sup> The memo is only dated June 3<sup>rd</sup>, but it seems likely that it was 1942. MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file #221.

<sup>288</sup> Beaumont Newhall joined the MOMA staff in 1935 as a librarian; on learning of Newhall’s interest in photography, Alfred Barr invited him to oversee the survey exhibition, *Photography: 1839-1937*. Newhall was then appointed curator of the new photography department when it was established in 1940. In 1942, Newhall joined the U.S. Air Force as a photo intelligence officer, and his wife, Nancy, became the acting curator of the department. See John Szarkowski, “Photography,” in *The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Abrams, Inc. with the Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p.463-466. Szarkowski does not discuss Nancy Newhall’s tenure, which appears not to have yet been analyzed in a scholarly fashion.

Beau: I heard at the Exhibitions Com. of the proposed Weston show on which, as I remember it, no action was taken. As a member of your committee (do we ever meet, oui or non?) I'd like to suggest that if this can't be arranged we have a show of Helen Leavitt (sp?). As a matter of fact I think that between the two her show would be more exciting and more contemporary, but that's only personal opinion of course. Practical conclusion: the budget on her show would be far lower.<sup>289</sup>

Soby's sense that Levitt's work was "more exciting and more contemporary" than Weston's seems to have struck a chord with Newhall. If the department was open to such a young and untested photographer, perhaps it was because the medium itself remained young and untested as a component of the museum. The new photography department was still heterodox in its tastes. Since no authoritative photography canon had yet been established (despite Stieglitz's best efforts), the department held to an open-minded philosophy of exhibition and collection; it included in its purview photographs that ranged from magazine journalism to scientific studies to self-consciously aesthetic statements.<sup>290</sup> And perhaps Levitt's rapid ascension into the museum had to do with the fact that Nancy Newhall had stepped in as acting curator while her husband was enlisted into military service. In any case, by September of 1942, discussion was under way for a show that would feature Levitt prominently. Nancy Newhall wrote to her husband to report on the latest developments:

Lunch with Levitt was swell. So much news to be broken with no acquaintances at all to base it on—and the first thing that happened was that she asked about our cats and said she had just moved, leaving her roommates cats behind and wanted a cat badly. So she's coming to dinner tomorrow with Charles and Musya [Sheeler] and Dave [McAlpin] and will make acquaintance with Euripides [their cat]. I don't know why or how she and I suddenly became friends, but we did. We discussed her show—to be one man or not—and she asked 'Have you any Cartier-Bresson?' I said we did, and Julien's collection besides, and outlined the show we've been thinking about a long time—stereos and Martin and early Stieglitz and Cartier and herself—as a rough draft and she liked it very much.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file #221.

<sup>290</sup> John Szarkowski discusses the open-minded stance the department took in its early years in his essay "Photography" in *The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Abrams, Inc. and the Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 463-466. He writes that the collection took shape in an ad hoc fashion, for there was "no clear path and aesthetic philosophy" to govern decision-making; photography constituted "an immense and enormously diverse agglomeration of commercial entrepreneurs, technicians, journalists, publicist, scientists, amateurs." As a good example of the absence of an orthodoxy within the department, consider that the August 11 – September 19, 1943 Action Photography show—which included two Levitt prints, the children playing with a broken mirror (New York, 1940) and the girls' game (Mexico City, 1940)—was a real miscellany of material. It juxtaposed seven classic Stieglitz prints (including *Winter, Fifth Avenue*, 1892) with a Peter Stackpole *Life Magazine* photograph of "Carole Lombard, Charles Laughton, and Director Garson Kanin watching rushes of 'They Knew What They Wanted,' 1940". Other mind-bending pairings included Harold Edgerton's scientific studies of motion and Oscar Reijlander's *Boy Washing His Hands*, 1860. MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file #240

<sup>291</sup> Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall postmarked Sept 10, 1942, Newhall archive, Getty Museum of Art, Box 137, folder 18, "War Letters July 29-Sept. 19, 1942."

In reply, Beaumont Newhall sent his wife the following letter from overseas, dated September of 1942:

I'm glad that you have made friends with Helen Levitt—how splendid that she is going to put up Euripides. The few times I have met her have led me to feel that she is an extraordinary person, one who needs encouragement to free her from her shy and retiring manner. It's your show, darling, entirely yours—the one you originated and have been talking about, and it's going to be good. That the committee approves is fine.<sup>292</sup>

By November of 1942, the show that was “entirely” Nancy Newhall's had evolved into Levitt's debut one-person exhibition, as the acting curator explained to her enlisted husband in a letter of November 2, 1942:

And Jim [Soby?] and Alfred [Barr?] think maybe the Cartier-Bresson part of that show should be postponed till a thorough job can be done, and Levitt go on by herself. I do not think she can take it. She sent me the charming little pictures of the boys leaping with a [branch ?], by the way.

Once the decisions had been finalized, things moved swiftly. By December 2, 1942, Nancy Newhall was in a position to write to Dr. Eliot Porter, whose color photographs of birds were scheduled to be exhibited in March of 1943, explaining that his show would be matched with a parallel one-person show by a young photographer named Helen Levitt:

Dear Dr. Porter,

The beauty of the birds filled the Exhibitions Committee with unusual enthusiasm, and they are to be shown here in March. We're putting up at the same time some of Helen Levitt's extraordinary photographs of children. Do you know Miss Levitt and her work? She's quite young, was inspired by Cartier-Bresson and helped in realizing her ideas by Walker Evans, and her things have a strange split-second kind of poetry. The two shows are so utterly different in character that they seem to us to discourse music together, and with them we are inaugurating a new policy of exhibiting exciting projects by themselves as they occur, rather than waiting to incorporate them much later into monumental one-man show.<sup>293</sup>

### **“Extraordinary Photographs of Children”: The 1943 Exhibition and Its Reception**

Helen Levitt's exhibition “Photographs of Children” opened at MOMA on Tuesday, March 9, 1943, with 56 photographs on view (figure 3.18). Newhall had arranged the exhibition into two separate sections based on geographic region: New York City and Mexico. Within the

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<sup>292</sup> Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, Sept. 13, 1943, Newhall archive, Getty Museum of Art, Box 137, folder 18, “War Letters July 29-Sept. 19, 1942.”

<sup>293</sup> MOMA Archives, curatorial exhibition files #221.

New York section, she grouped the photographs around six thematic subsections: The Streets, Masks, Improvisations, Portraits, Chalk Drawings, and Emotions. No themes were used to cluster the Mexico pictures, which constituted a much smaller group (only 15 out of the total). The installation photographs show that individual pictures were grouped together and mounted in rows on panels, a form of display that may have been inspired by, and in turn heightened, the cinematic quality of Levitt's vision.

To introduce Levitt's work to the public, Newhall composed a brief article, "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children," for readers of the April 1943 issue of the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*.<sup>294</sup> It included five reproductions that must have served to pique readers' interest: the three maskers on the stoop, the boys wrestling in a Mexican courtyard, the mirror scene, and the picture of a boy climbing the doorjamb of some rotting architectural interior (figure 3.19), as well as one "pavement drawing."<sup>295</sup> These are among the photographs that Newhall likely had before her eyes as she crafted her text, which is one of the more important documents extant from the exhibition, for it suggests something of the range of meanings that Levitt's photographs of children seemed to embody for viewers at the time, and it sets out many of the critical tropes that would circulate in Levitt criticism in 1943 and beyond.

For example, Newhall was one of the first to promulgate the view that Levitt's pictures are a function of the photographer's own extraordinary discretion, her ability to slip unnoticed into others' private worlds: "Helen Levitt seems to walk invisible among the children," begins Newhall's assessment of the work, thus inaugurating the trope of the photographer as a self-effacing, spectral figure, a quasi-disembodied spy, who possesses a god-like power. In wondering about Levitt's ability to make herself "invisible," it seems probable that she was alluding to the air of self-contained absorption that prevails in both the mirror scene and the three maskers of the stoop, as well as the incongruity of the child who seems to be stuck on the doorjamb like a cat in a tree.

For Newhall, Levitt's personal qualities and her skill go hand in hand: "She is young, she has the eye of a poet, and she has not forgotten the strange world which tunnels back through thousands of years to the dim beginnings of the human race." The archeological image of tunneling back through time was a staple of primitivist thinking; as discussed in chapter one, within the primitivizing doctrine that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, the child was understood as the living embodiment of the ancient past. In Newhall's account, then, Levitt's work was "exciting and contemporary" (to recall Soby's praise), when it was paradoxically a resurfacing of an imagined past: "With her camera to her eye, she watches a group playing: she seizes the split second when the dark world rises visible into the light." The photographic language of light and shadow is here grafted onto a sense of temporal prestidigitation: through the "split second" fixing of time that the camera engenders, Levitt brings to light the shadowy figures of primitive origins. Levitt's photographs function as evidence, but they are paradoxically signs of irrational realms lurking within the modern city:

She understands the magic of metamorphosis—how a mask invests the wearer with the power of the enigma, how a discarded mirror or an empty house may engender a hundred

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<sup>294</sup> "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, April 1943.

<sup>295</sup> The caption noted that "All photographs reproduced are from the Collection of the Museum except that of the pavement drawing." Szarkowski, *op. cit.* lists Levitt as one of the 10 "major living photographers of whose work the museum had acquired 10 or more prints by 1942," p.464. The others are Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Man Ray, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, Eliot Porter, Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Weston.

improvisations full of danger and destruction. Reverently she records the occult symbols drawn on walls and sidewalks.

If we listen closely to the terms on offer in this passage, we hear Newhall positioning Levitt's work in relation to the rise of popularized anthropology that had seized the public and artistic imagination by 1943, which Michael Leja examines so persuasively in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*.<sup>296</sup> Emphasizing Levitt's iconography of the mask, the primitivizing connotations of "occult symbols," and the affective charge of "danger and destruction," Newhall evokes on Levitt's behalf notions that belonged to what Leja calls Modern Man Discourse. Newhall thus implies Levitt's photographs were not merely snapshots of children in New York and Mexico; they were revelations of the nature of the human psyche.

Yet Newhall also found it necessary to address economic class as a dimension of Levitt's vision. It was not children *in general* that Levitt photographed but specifically the children of the poor; for Newhall, it is axiomatic that such children exist in closer proximity to the primitivist realms of "magic and terror":

The children of the poor are not starched and supervised. Roaming in tribes through the streets and empty lots, they inherit to the full the magic and terror of the inscrutable world. Joyous, vicious, remote, or sad, these photographs arouse in adults a swift and poignant succession of emotions.

There is a complex act of projection and interpretation going on in these lines. They impute a kind of anarchic freedom to poor children (who are portrayed as "not starched and supervised"), which in turn seems to stir a primitivizing nostalgia in the adult viewer. Notice, for example, the curious turn of phrase, "they inherit to the full the magic and terror of the inscrutable world," in which the verb "inherit" makes poverty into a strange gift, the conferral of ineffable affect, charisma, and mystery on the poor. This conceit restates the longstanding trope of the poor as noble savages. Moreover, this mystification of poverty links class inseparably to race. Proceeding to sketch out the basic facts of Levitt's career, Newhall makes special note of the two locales that constitute Levitt's source material—Harlem and Mexico:

Helen Levitt was born in New York City. She started photographing children in 1936. Harlem, with its mixture of races—Negroes, gypsies, Latins—is where she finds the most vivid action. Nearly always she uses a Leica with a right angle sight which enables her to avoid pointing directly at her subject. In 1941, when she went to Mexico for a few months, she found most of her material in Tacubaya, a suburb of Mexico City. The majority of the New York series were taken during the last four years.

Although the text treats the decision to photograph "Negroes, gypsies, Latins" matter of factly, we are given to understand that Harlem is as exotic a site as Mexico—a kind of colonial space within the boundaries of the great American metropolis, a site of diasporic cultures and "racial" mingling. These comments suggest that Levitt's photographic project was deeply informed by the ethnographic or factographic<sup>297</sup> impulse that shaped the visual culture of the 1930s even as it

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<sup>296</sup> Leja, Michael. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, op. cit.

<sup>297</sup> John Roberts analyzes the "factographic" effort of the 1930s in *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York: 1998.

could speak to the primitivizing turn of the early 1940s. It was a liminal way of seeing, that stood betwixt and between two conceptual paradigms: the documentary record of the 1930s and the new emphasis on subjectivity that took hold in the 1940s. Indeed, if Levitt's pictures of children seemed to merit strong praise in 1943—and unlike the Mexico work, they received enthusiastic and unqualified praise—this was because of their “capacity to accommodate the instability of conflicting interpretations.”<sup>298</sup> We can hear some of those colliding interpretations in the comments that Levitt's work generated in the press between 1943 and 1944.

### **Levitt's First Critics: Terms of Reception, 1943-1944**

Considering photography's still relatively marginal status as an art form circa 1943, “Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt” at the Museum of Modern Art made something of a splash in both the camera periodicals and the general press. What seemed to draw critics' attention were the pictures' strangeness and their suppleness as visual signs. In each of the major written responses, critics found it necessary to praise Levitt's artistry and yet to hint that there was something provocative about her depiction of “Harlem ragamuffins,” as *Time* magazine put it.<sup>299</sup> That is to say, the criticism formulated in response to the 1943 exhibition was distinctly different from today's reigning consensus. Whereas recent critics have spoken of “lyrical beauty,” Levitt's first critics talked about “desperation,” “wretchedness” and above all “realism.” Their terms gave equal weight to the political and the aesthetic implications of Levitt's pictures.

Not that Levitt herself made any overt statements about politics—she let the pictures do her talking for her. Indeed, when *Time* magazine reported on the young photographer's one-person show at MOMA, she was her characteristically reticent, even evasive self. The magazine printed the photograph of three African-American boys playing cops and robbers, their holdout a building's front stoop (figure 3.20), and glossed it with the following text:

These miniature Harlem ragamuffins were photographed by Helen Levitt, whose pictures of children were shown last week at Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art. Critics wondered how she did it—her subjects seemed to have had absolutely no idea that a camera was anywhere around.

Part of Helen Levitt's secret is a right-angle sight on her Leica, which allows her to avoid pointing the camera directly at her subject. But Levitt's photography is the result of far more than a good gadget. She has a hypersensitive eye for the moment that reveals character, a poet's love of the distinctively grotesque, and the fine taste that avoids the specious trickeries so easy in photography. Born in New York City in 1913, dark, shy Helen Levitt likes Harlem because ‘there's more going on there,’ colored children because ‘I think they are beautiful.’<sup>300</sup>

We can imagine the queries the reporter put to Levitt. *Why do you photograph in Harlem?* “There's more going on there.” *Why do you photograph colored children?* “I think they are beautiful.” The answer is both curt and assertive, and it seems to assume that the questioner

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<sup>298</sup> I appropriated this lucid phrasing from Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (London: Yale University Press, c2002), p. 70.

<sup>299</sup> “Snooper with a Camera,” *Time*, March 29, 1943.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

himself is unable to imagine the beauty of these children. The remark implies that there was a politics at stake in Levitt's decision to photograph "colored children" playing in the streets circa 1943—the year when Harlem would explode in the second great riot within less than a decade.<sup>301</sup> For "dark, shy Helen Levitt" to insist on the beauty of "colored children" was surely a way to avoid rehearsing the inadequate, offensive terminology of a "Negro problem" (such as we heard mobilized in *Fortune* magazine) and at the same time to declare where she stood in the racial politics of the day. As a photographer, she was not an assertively political animal. She did not presume to argue a cause. But I think she knew well that declaring, in words and in pictures, the "beauty" of "Harlem ragamuffins" was, in 1943, an unavoidably political act.

It certainly was for Lorraine Freimann, who reviewed the exhibition in 1944 when it traveled to Indiana under the title "City Children at Play—Photographs by Helen Levitt."<sup>302</sup> Freimann introduced Levitt as both a "skilled craftsman as well as an accurate and sympathetic reporter" who is also

a humanitarian whose heart must guide her fingers in the magic moment when she contracts her lens. For how else could she present with such sureness and simplicity the great truths, the simple joys, the intolerable inexcusable tragedies of childhood?

Her subject, "Children," is of course universal in appeal. But never does she err by serving it overdone or dripping in mawkish sentiment. None of Levitt's photographs brings a reaction of 'what a sweet child.' Oh no—rather she has given us portrayals of the underprivileged street urchin, from Harlem to Mexico. Then, through photographing her subject, always unposed and unaware, she achieves uniformly vivid, definite results.

For Freimann, Levitt's scenes of children's play were as far as one could go from the ideological touchstone of the sentimentalized child, because they focused attention on its antithesis, the "underprivileged street urchin." Moreover, what Levitt seemed to reveal to view was that "urchin's" "desperate need for sublimation in a world of make-believe:"

The observer is never sorry for these unfortunates. Instead, you are humbled before such poverty and proud before the victim's resourcefulness and inventiveness. In 'War Paint,' 'Masks and Bugle' and 'Wreath Improved' (to mention only a few), we see improvisations that are sure proof of her subjects' desperate need for sublimation in a world of make-believe.

Freimann also thought that "Levitt's group titled 'Portraits' might more aptly be called 'Suffer the little children,' It is a poignant, powerful series proving the maladjustment of her subjects to the world about and before them. The implications are clear, positive, and unavoidable."

What were the implications that Freimann thought "clear, positive, and unavoidable"? I believe she was pointing to the harshness of a class stratified society. Consider two of the photographs that were included in the "Portraits" section of the exhibition, and which Freimann would have seen: figure 3.23, which Levitt privately referred to as "Two Wild Little Girls," and

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<sup>301</sup> Sara Blair discusses the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, including their photographic visualization, in chapter one of *op. cit.*

<sup>302</sup> Lorraine Freimann. "Photo Display At Art Museum Considered Outstanding Exhibit," *Fort Wayne Indiana Journal Gazette*, March 19, 1944. MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file II.1.46.2



figure 3.24, the double portrait of (apparently) a brother and sister, alone in their mutual alienation. The very sensitivity of these portraits is in the service of showing us children—figures of vulnerability—who seem to be marooned in inhospitable urban space. Notice the way in which Levitt uses great swathes of empty space to suggest the “terror” that Newhall talked about, and how the tenderness of Levitt’s regard for the children’s individuality only amplifies the sense of urban neglect. The children function as living foils to their environment, and vice versa.

Indeed, when John Adam Knight reviewed “Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt” for the periodical *U.S. Camera*, he began his assessment of the photographs by suggesting they were “most impressive” because they see children as “deadly serious,” “sad”:

This is almost a guarantee that the pictures are not posed. When you see a photograph of a group of laughing children, playing merry games, you may be sure the picture was posed, or at least the children knew they were being watched by adults and acted as they thought adults would act.<sup>303</sup>

This is a logic that we have encountered before, for it runs through much of the writing on Levitt: that the camera has a propensity to induce a certain self-conscious factitiousness in the form of the pose, and that Levitt’s pictures are insightful precisely because they defeat the pose. The active language of the body is the guarantor of truth (a proposition very similar to Martha Graham’s contemporaneously-forged notion that “the body doesn’t lie.”) As Knight goes on to declare,

Miss Levitt is obviously a very discerning young woman, for she recognizes this truth and gets it into her pictures by taking them when her subjects are unaware they are being watched. This gives them a validity seldom found in this field of photography. Her children are earnest, serious, intent. Cruelty, hate, and zealous fervor motivate her youthful cops and robbers. Troubled love, tenderness and apprehension distinguish her little mothers. Dreams and ideals, beyond the imagining of adults, are mirrored in these faces.

They are real people, living through real experiences, but if they had known they were being photographed they would only have been young exhibitionists.

In Knight’s analysis, “validity”—truthfulness—is synonymous with the truth of *emotion*. We should take notice of the kinds of emotion that Knight lists as Levitt’s subjects: alongside “tenderness” there is a whole harvest of aversive, afflictive emotions: “cruelty” and “hate,” “troubled love” and “apprehension.” These are photographs, he suggests, that demonstrate childhood is no utopia of innocence. In fact, Knight goes on to declare that Levitt’s pictures are motivated by “an appreciation of youth’s essential wretchedness.”

Surely the “wretchedness” of which Knight speaks would have been understood by viewer/readers in 1943 as the wretchedness of a childhood lived under the shadow of poverty. Let me be clear: nowhere does Knight explicitly use the words “class,” or “poverty.” But he didn’t need to, for the pictures and captions arrayed throughout the main article make poverty vividly present to view, from the torn hole in the breeches of the main protagonist of figure 3.20 to the torn shirt of the African American child surrounded by better tended playmates in the

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<sup>303</sup> “Review by John Adam Knight,” *U.S. Camera*, May 1943, vol. 6 #4, p.17.

famous broken mirror scene (fig. 2.3). A particularly fierce delineation of poverty was chosen to open *U.S. Camera's* discussion of Levitt's work: Levitt's street portrait of a young Mexican girl, huddled beneath her shawl, effortfully climbing the slope of an unpaved street, picking her way among the detritus that litters the way. Its accompanying caption both acknowledges the picture's concern for poverty and carefully avoids stating it directly:

Along the street in Tacubaya, Mexico City. Helen Levitt's pictures have a sense of realism that cannot be overlooked. This is one of a series she made while in Mexico in 1941. Miss Levitt's photographs—a far cry from the pretty-pretty school—are certainly not sob-sister pathetic cries, but a steadfast command to look. The picture was made with a 35 mm camera on Superpan Supreme film. Exposure data unknown.

A “sense of realism that cannot be overlooked,” “a far cry from the pretty-pretty school,” “not sob-sister pathetic cries but a steadfast command to look”—this, I think, is where the politics of poverty is both signaled and submerged. Instead of using the politically explosive term “class,” the writers/editors have recourse to the term realism. Realism provides the coded term for pointing to the fact that these pictures stake their interest on the poignant contradiction between the children's youthful vitality and the “essential wretchedness” of their impoverished circumstances.

In other words, for viewers in the 1940s, these children had nothing to do with sweetness and light. There was instead something desperate, sad, and uncanny about them, and that something pointed to the afflictions of class, though writers carefully tiptoed around that term. They spoke instead about the striking “realism” of the photographs.

As a final piece of evidence on this point, consider the article that Levitt's patron, James Thrall Soby, composed for the magazine *Minicam*, a monthly publication designed for aficionados of the miniature camera.<sup>304</sup> Soby devoted his critical essay to explaining how Levitt and Cartier-Bresson were pioneering a new photographic aesthetic, one that was bringing to light the previously untapped potential of the hand-held camera. In the main, his article was concerned to construct a technologically-oriented history of photography, but also to explain the excitement of this new way of working. He defined the Cartier-Levitt photography” as “an art of poetic accident, the recording of subject matter at a moment of great emotional intensity...with the minimum of technical calculation.” And then, towards the end of his article, he abandoned the details of camera equipment and technique to ponder the implications of Levitt's subject matter, explaining that she had made “a magnificent series of prints of children at play”:

Her preference is for the children of Harlem, where the relationship of child to city is more acute and real than in prosperous sections of New York, where the pavement is the nurse of the young, a blackboard for their fantasy. She photographs children at the weird climax of their activities, recording their daring, the ruthless energy of their dreams, the capacity for charade which transforms them behind the masks they wear. In doing so she furnishes a document on childhood which should be of great value to psychiatrists as well as to those who recognize children's games as Americana of the first importance. For those who prefer to admire fine photography for its own sake, she is creating images of a new and moving beauty.

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<sup>304</sup> Soby, James Thrall. “The Art of Poetic Accident: Photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt,” *Minicam*, March, 1943, p. 28—33 and 95.

Here was a moment when Levitt's work could be read in multiple ways, from the aesthetic to the social, from the psychoanalytic to the nationalist. Levitt provided "images of a new and moving beauty," if one chose to "admire fine photography for its own sake"; yet something more than beauty was at stake because in Harlem "the relationship of child to city is more acute and real than in prosperous sections of New York." "Acute and real" provide euphemisms for the pressure of poverty, and the pictures are, for Soby, not merely aesthetic achievements—though they certainly are that—but also testaments to the stifling effects of class hierarchy on the young. Notice that he goes so far as to propose that psychiatrists might find them "of great value." Indeed, Soby was so convinced that there was an evidentiary value to these photographs that he took it upon himself to write to Dr. Lauretta Bender of the Bellevue Hospital Psychiatric Division on March 17, 1943 to invite her personally to Levitt's exhibit:

Dear Dr. Bender:

We are now having an exhibition which I think might be of particular interest to you. It is a group of photographs of children in Harlem and Spanish Harlem by a young American photographer, Helen Levitt. Miss Levitt has developed a remarkable technique of photographing children unawares at moments of high emotional intensity. She has made an invaluable record of children's game, but more than this has, I believe, thrown a great deal of light on the psychology of city children in the poorer neighborhoods.

Her exhibition will continue here until April 18<sup>th</sup>. I mention it to you first because I think you would enjoy seeing it and secondly because it occurred to me that Miss Levitt might be of special use in your work at Bellevue Hospital. She could, I am sure, make an extraordinary document of abnormal children in the Hospital, a document which, I should think, would have considerable research value though I am of course not qualified to say so. I do know that this kind of project would interest Miss Levitt enormously.<sup>305</sup>

Though nothing seems to have come of this suggestion, it is certainly intriguing to imagine Helen Levitt "enormously" interested in photographing "abnormal children in the Hospital," as if she might have evolved into a Diane Arbus *avant la lettre*. (And by 1946, she would be working with Janice Loeb, James Agee, and Sidney Meyers on the film *The Quiet One*, which was precisely about a psychologically troubled black child who receives help in a progressively minded institution.)

I am interested in these moments of Levitt's early reception—interested enough to have quoted them at length—because they seem to me to complicate today's dominant view that Levitt's photographs are a "disinterested art," objects of "lyrical beauty," a "poem about freedom." Contrast those claims with the caption *Minicam* gave to Levitt's photograph of two masked children climbing a tree: "Poverty and squalor have failed to depress these children in their imaginative play," it read, underscoring the sense that the photograph is all about the contradiction between the players' youthful vitality and the ominous, decaying environment in which they cavort. I do not think that the first viewers were wrong. I think they read the photographs differently, because the prints were not yet bathed in an aura of nostalgia and the glow of canonization.

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<sup>305</sup> MOMA Archives curatorial exhibition file #221.

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I have devoted the bulk of this chapter to analyzing the range of responses that Levitt's work first generated in the press in order to sift and weigh the question of the politics of her pictures. It is striking to unpack the difference between the terms used in recent criticism versus the kinds of comments made in the early reception of the work. In lieu of "beauty" or "poetry," the first critics insisted on "weirdness," "desperate sublimation," "wretchedness" and above all, "realism." The final term was the one no writer seemed able to do without; it appeared in all of the criticism, from the more aesthetically inclined analyses printed in the camera magazines to the more politically explicit musings that appeared in the general press. "Realism," I want to suggest, meant the linkage between photographic descriptiveness and the material texture of working class life. It was a word that did double duty, signaling both the attributes of the camera as a record-making machine and the class specific world to which Levitt devoted her early work.

At the same time, we should also bear in mind that by 1942, Levitt had already begun to move from still photography into film making. The story of her extensive involvement in film was for many years occluded in the Levitt scholarship, but it has recently been excavated by the careful effort of Jan-Christopher Horak. His study of photographers who made a significant contribution to film history, *Making Images Move*, is an invaluable resource to consult in seeking to understand Levitt's second career as a film-maker.

As Horak explains, Levitt's "big ambition"<sup>306</sup> had long been to make a film, which is in keeping with the emphasis on movement in her still pictures. She began to make steady progress toward the realization of that ambition by early 1942, when she landed a job as an apprentice to Helen van Dongen, the editor of Luis Bunuel's *The Spanish Earth*. Once again, her lucky break came by way of Janice Loeb, who showed Levitt's still photographs to Bunuel.<sup>307</sup> By 1943, Levitt was deeply immersed in filmmaking—to the point where it seems to have supplanted her work with still photography—assembling the film *Here Is China* from stock and newsreel footage, and in April of that year, beginning to work for Irving Lerner at the Office of War Information as an assistant editor to Henwar Rodakiewicz.<sup>308</sup> Horak reports that during her tenure at the Office of War Information Levitt began to pursue her own film-making endeavors, though it is important to note that this was a thoroughly collaborative effort conducted with Janice Loeb. As Maria Morris Hambourg explains in the 1991 exhibition catalogue: "With a home movie camera belonging to Loeb, Levitt and Loeb began to shoot [film footage on the streets] for their own pleasure."<sup>309</sup>

The flowering of Loeb and Levitt's film collaboration came in 1945-46 when Agee joined forces with them. Levitt told me that she had confided to Loeb, "I want to make movies," and that her friend encouraged her to pursue that ambition.<sup>310</sup> On another occasion, she remembered asking Agee, "Do you think if I went out with a movie camera and did the same thing I could make a movie?"<sup>311</sup> Together, the three became excited about the prospect of

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<sup>306</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, "Helen Levitt: Seeing with One's Own Eyes," *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997), p.141.

<sup>307</sup> Horak, *ibid.* p.141. See also Maria Morris Hambourg, *op. cit.* p. 57.

<sup>308</sup> Horak, *ibid.* p.141-142.

<sup>309</sup> Hambourg, *op. cit.* p.57

<sup>310</sup> 11.8.2007 author interview with Levitt.

<sup>311</sup> 11.18.2007 author interview with Levitt.

making a film that would be “a cinematic version of Levitt’s photographs,”<sup>312</sup> according to Morris Hambourg, although Agee did little actual shooting.

Most of the film was shot in East Harlem by Levitt and Loeb, frequently working as a team. Each would reconnoiter a block, perhaps East 102<sup>nd</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup> streets, and then meet to see if either had found an animated theater. If so, they returned to the scene of promise together and worked around each other.<sup>313</sup>

Levitt remembered the film as an amateur production in the best sense of the term—a project undertaken purely in the spirit of play: “We’d go out, shoot for fun, and look at it on a projector.”<sup>314</sup>

The camera work was a true collaboration, but Levitt was the one who edited the film stock together into a kinetic collage of urban scenes. As she explained it to me, “One day when I had a low-grade fever I decided to put it together.”<sup>315</sup> Although the film would not be released until 1952, Horak discovered from his interviews with Levitt that in 1947 she screened the film under the title *I Hate 104<sup>th</sup> Street* in Provincetown, Massachusetts—the title came from a chalk graffito reading “I hate 104<sup>th</sup> Street,” which had initially been used as the film’s opening shot but was later removed.<sup>316</sup>

Levitt’s interest in film had been brewing for years—she would probably say it went back all the way to her childhood love affair with cinema. She directly linked her aesthetic education to her lifelong passion for movie-going: “I think my imagination was formed by the movies. I went every Saturday to see the serial... You’d go in around 2:00 and get home around 5:00. You’d have candy bars you’d be chomping on.”<sup>317</sup> Later, when she reached adulthood, Soviet avant-garde films became a touchstone for her, most especially Aleksandr Dovzhenko’s *Aerograd* (1935), which was initially released under the name *Frontier*, and which she saw “half-a-dozen times.”<sup>318</sup>

Levitt’s enthusiasm for film would have found ready encouragement among her friends and contemporaries, not least James Agee, who became a film critic for *Time* magazine in 1941, as mentioned in chapter two. Indeed, Levitt was immersed in a cultural context, and a social milieu, that revered cinema as “the Master Medium.”<sup>319</sup> New York in the 1930s was a hotbed of left-leaning film activity,<sup>320</sup> an epicenter for what Horak has identified as “the first American

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<sup>312</sup> *ibid.* p.5

<sup>313</sup> *ibid.* p.58.

<sup>314</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> Juan Suárez, “Inner-City Surrealism: James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt’s *In the Street*,” in *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007.) Suárez explains that the film was reedited into its present form in 1952, p.238.

<sup>317</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 12.4.2007

<sup>318</sup> Morris Hambourg lists Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Pukdovkin’s *Mother* (1926), Nikolai Ekk’s *The Road to Life* (1931) and Dovzhenko’s *Aerograd* (1935) as Levitt’s particular favorites; she also reports that Cartier-Bresson recommended *Aerograd* to Levitt and that she saw it “half-a-dozen times.” *op. cit.* p.49.

<sup>319</sup> The phrase comes from Ben Shahn, as discussed in Jenna Webster, “Ben Shahn and the Master Medium,” *Ben Shahn’s New York*, p.77.

<sup>320</sup> See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

film avant-garde.”<sup>321</sup> Moreover, there were fertile theoretical, practical, and institutional exchanges between the domains of film and still photography. One measure of that overlap is the sheer number of still photographers who embarked on substantial film projects; a very partial list might begin with Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Jay Leyda, Ralph Steiner, Willard Van Dyke, Henri Cartier-Bresson (all friends or associates of Levitt), as well as Paul Strand. Another indicator of the crossover between the two modes is the number of institutions that provided opportunities to contemplate their inter-relationship. For example, when the Photo League was founded in December of 1930 out of the pre-existing Workers Camera League, it was specifically conceptualized as the Workers Film and Photo League, for the two modes of camera production were understood to be related.<sup>322</sup> By 1933 the Workers Film and Photo League had formed the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School.<sup>323</sup> Many pages of the League’s mimeographed newsletter were devoted to attacking the fatuousness of Hollywood films and calling for an alternative, worker-identified mode of film-making.<sup>324</sup> The League was one important site where photography and film existed in dialogue, but other institutions were also establishing discursive links between the two modes of camerawork. Some forward-thinking art galleries made it a practice to present films, most notably the Julian Levy Gallery, which premiered Jay Leyda’s *A Bronx Morning* (1931), Henwar Rodakiewicz’s *Portrait of a Young Man* (1932), and Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* (1936).<sup>325</sup> In 1933, Julian Levy “installed film stills as part of the Cartier-Bresson and anti-graphic photography exhibition.”<sup>326</sup> The same year, New York Public Library photography curator Romana Javitz teamed up with photographer and film-maker Jay Leyda to present exhibition titled “The Moving Picture as an Art Form,” which was “especially popular.”<sup>327</sup>

Levitt must have been aware of the lively debates being devoted to the aesthetics and politics of film, for she was connected to some of the leading voices in the radical film-making community, including Ralph Steiner, Willard Van Dyke, and most significantly, Ben Maddow and Sidney Meyers. A close friend of Levitt’s, Meyers was an important presence in the leftist avant-garde film circles that congregated around the Film and Photo League and, after 1935, its split-off organization, Nykino. Meyers was a prolific film critic for the magazine *New Theatre*, writing under the pen name Robert Stebbins, and he had participated in the League’s Harry Alan

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<sup>321</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, “The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p.14-66.

<sup>322</sup> Alexander, *op. cit.* p.6.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.* p.50

<sup>324</sup> Alexander documents the fact that “a relatively large amount of League time [was] devoted to a critical attack upon the industry film. Two reasons accounted for this: the League was composed of a small, unknown group of filmmakers [and still photographers] in New York, with scant equipment and a narrow purse, and the industry they conceived as their opponents was a multimillion-dollar industry with complete control, not only over every conventional channel of distribution, but over the minds and pocketbooks of the American working class.” p.20

<sup>325</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, “The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945,” in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>326</sup> Jenna Webster, “Ben Shahn and the Master Medium,” *op. cit.* p.138.

<sup>327</sup> *ibid.* p. 81. Webster notes that Shahn viewed film stills at the New York Public Library Picture Collection, where during the Depression he, “Evans, Berenice Abbott, Diego Rivera, Joseph Cornell, and other artists ‘used to hang out...all day,’ gathering material for their art from big wooden bins filled with clippings. There Shahn could access the nearly twenty thousand stills that had been deposited by movie studios. The curator Romana Javitz regularly assembled these images into pedagogic exhibits, such as *The Moving Picture as an Art Form*, an especially popular show arranged with the help of Jay Leyda.” p.81

Potamkin Film School classes<sup>328</sup> before joining Nykino in 1935.<sup>329</sup> We can surmise with some confidence that, through her connection to Meyers and his work for *New Theatre*, Levitt would have been linked in to left-leaning avant-garde film discourse and practice. *New Theatre* regularly published impassioned manifestos calling for a “revolt from Hollywood,”<sup>330</sup> such as Leo Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner’s “A New Approach to Film Making,” which appeared in the September 1935 issue of the magazine—the same issue that published Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photographs of boys playing mock warfare, discussed in chapter one. It is worth examining in detail Hurwitz and Steiner’s, partly because Levitt may well have read the article (though that cannot be proved), but also because their words suggest something of the general theorizing about radical film-making that seems to have informed her approach to the medium:

During the twenties we grew disgusted with the philistinism of the commercial film product, its superficial approach, trivial themes, and its standardization of film treatment: the straight-line story progressing from event to event on a pure suspense basis, unmarred by any imaginative use of the camera, unmarred by any freshness in editing or any human or formal sensitivity. Our reaction, which we shared with the young generation of experimental filmmakers, was a more or less aesthetic revolt from the current manner of film production. The important thing, we felt, was to do those things which the film was capable of, but which the commercial film didn’t and couldn’t possibly do. There seemed unbounded possibilities for the use of the film as a visual poetry of formal beauty.<sup>331</sup>

It seems striking how closely this call for “aesthetic revolt” corresponds to Levitt, Loeb, and Agee’s *In the Street*. Rejecting the convention of a “straight-line story progressing from event to event,” their film is constructed precisely from a concern for “imaginative use of the camera...freshness in editing” and “human or formal sensitivity.” It eschews dialogue, narration, and—in its original construction<sup>332</sup>—sound itself. In forswearing those technological advancements in film-making, it presents to view a dance of shifting images that possess a dream-like quality; it is curiously evocative of early cinema,<sup>333</sup> maybe even of magic lantern

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<sup>328</sup> Alexander reports that Meyers joined the League in 1934 (p.18), but that Meyers recollected receiving little substantive training from the film classes he attended there: “I wanted to work on films, either teach or learn, and I went to the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, and every time I would go there and start to discuss the work or pull out some equipment, the head of the school would say sorry classes are called off, we’re demonstrating in front of a movie up on Broadway, class will be conducted tomorrow. Night after night I went to make a film or to teach, and night after night they said no class, there is a Fascist film, or there was some kind of deadly film to counter, or some mass meeting. I never had a chance to work on any films.” *ibid.* p.51

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.* p.81.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.* p.19

<sup>331</sup> Leo Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner, “A New Approach to Film Making,” *New Theatre*, September 1935, p. 22.

<sup>332</sup> Levitt said the film was originally silent and remained silent for a long time. Author interview with Levitt, 11.8.2007.

<sup>333</sup> “Whereas classical cinema features central perspective, composition in depth, continuity editing, spectatorial identification through cross-cutting closeups, realist acting styles, and closed narratives, early cinema is defined through centrifugal, decentered compositions, discontinuous editing, long shots that block spectatorial identification, stylized acting, and open narratives demanding pro-filmic knowledge.” Horak, *Lovers of Cinema*. p.6. Levitt’s film shares many of these attributes, with the exception of “stylized acting,” for her film is on some level about the non-acting of everyday people found on the streets. Yet just as in her still photographs, there is a pervasive attention to the theatricality of daily life, not least in the figure of an androgynous toddler who performs a ludic dance, and in doing so becomes the star of the film. Suarez also discerns a quality of “throwback” to early cinema in his analysis

shows. The film does seem to answer Hurwitz and Steiner's call for a "visual poetry of formal beauty," yet the beauty it invents is mingled with a taste for ugliness (a woman is shown picking her teeth) and a fascination with violence (children's Halloween games disintegrate into a threatening melee, fig. 3.25). Crowded with anarchic, disruptive children, the film is closely connected to Levitt's work in still photography. It could be seen as a kind of culmination of the work she had been doing since 1937 (fig. 3.26, for example, is a still that now exists as a print in the New York Public Library's Department of Photography).<sup>334</sup>

In March of 1946, Helen Levitt was unanimously selected to receive the Museum of Modern Art's Photography Fellowship. Perhaps the award came a trifle too late, for Levitt was by then fully involved in her new career as a film-maker. Along with the independent projects she was pursuing with Loeb, she worked in 1945 on Rodakeiwicz's *The Capital Story*<sup>335</sup>, and by 1946 she and Janice Loeb had teamed up with James Agee and Sidney Meyers to undertake their most ambitious joint project yet: the film *The Quiet One*. Conceived as a feature film about the Wiltwyck School for Boys, and shot between 1946 and 1948, it was intended to help the school raise funds to ensure its survival.<sup>336</sup>

Compared to the modernist, carnivalesque<sup>337</sup> satire of *In the Street*'s kaleidoscopic (non)structure, *The Quiet One* has not held up to the test of time. The problem resides not in the camera work, which remains compelling, but in its narrative thrust. Its plot creaks with an antiquated earnestness, and its voice-over by James Agee is stiff with didacticism. The film follows a ten-year-old African-American boy named Donald Peters, who has been committed to the Wiltwyck School in Esopus, New York, an institution designed to "rehabilitate" troubled boys. Using a flashback narrative structure, the film tracks Donald's transformation from a lonely, unhappy child ("the quiet one") to a newly open and trusting fellow, and it credits the enlightened psychiatric care of the school's staff for the boy's emotional resurrection. Weaving together past and present, the film oscillates between a vision of Harlem as a site of dysfunctionality—the narrator calls it "an endless corridor of despair"—with an idealization of the pastoral school as a wholly benevolent institution. In doing so, its story of healing tends to reduce issues of racial and economic justice to a discourse of psychological normalization, one that locates health and happiness in the country instead of the city.

Later in life, Levitt largely disowned the film, though in the 1970s she was still willing to discuss it for the public: the SFMOMA archives retain a typed interview, conducted by Bari

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of *In the Street* in *Pop Modernism*, op. cit. p.241: "Like *Manhatta*, it is a throwback to the actualities of the nickelodeon era and confirms the avant-garde's indebtedness to early cinema."

<sup>334</sup> But it also can be said to participate in a heightened cinematic attention to urban life that flowered within the 1930s film community. It is worth noting that by the time Levitt, Loeb, and Agee made *In the Street*, many of their contemporaries had also made city-themed movies. Scholar William Uricchio has identified "the city film" as a genre that came to the fore in the 1930s, listing among its important iterations Leyda's *A Bronx Morning* (1930), Herman G. Weinberg's *Autumn Fire* (1933), Irving Browning's *City of Contrasts* (1931), Lewis Jacobs' *City Block* (1934) and *As I Walk* (1934). Most relevant to Levitt scholarship is the fact that her friend Willard Van Dyke had directed a film titled *The City* in 1939. (Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler 1921 *Manhatta* also deserves mention in this list.) Van Dyke's film, in the collection of the George Eastman House, includes a scene of a child playing in the gutter. See William Uricchio, "The City Viewed" and Charles Wolfe, "Straight Shots and Crooked Plots: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s," in Horak, ed. op. cit.

<sup>335</sup> Horak, "Seeing with One's Own Eyes," *Making Images Move*, p. 141.

<sup>336</sup> Levitt recalled that Janice Loeb had been planning to donate money to the Wiltwyck school but conceived the idea of the film instead. They worked out the story line by reading case histories. Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007.

<sup>337</sup> Horak links *In the Street* to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in *Making Images Move*, p.146-148.



Lynn Gilliard and Vicki Levitt, in which Helen Levitt, Bill Levitt, and Janice Loeb offer a detailed account of the film's making. In that interview, Levitt voices her sense of the limitations that hampered the film:

...we were making a film for the school. It had a purpose. We were making a film that they could use to say what they were trying to do at the school—why they wanted the school supported, why the children needed help—and they had a thousand things to say. We were trying to say them in the best way we could for *them*. This is not our own film; it is a film *for* somebody to use. And if we'd been freer, there were many things we would not have put in...Some of the stuff is not as interesting to me as what happened between the kids themselves. I mean, some of the social work we had to go through...to me it wasn't as interesting, by any means, as the stuff we'd see and wish we could take with sound, such as kids and their own relationships—what happened and the things they said, and one thing and another.<sup>338</sup>

Nevertheless, for all of Levitt's misgivings about the film, it was strikingly well received in its day, not least for its delicate handling of the theme of a neglected and impoverished African-American child whom the courts send to Wiltwyck for "psychological and social rehabilitation."<sup>339</sup> Released in 1948, *The Quiet One* received a bounty of awards, including the First Prize and Critics' Award at the Venice International Film Festival in 1949 and the "Best Film of the Year" from the New York Newspaper Guild.<sup>340</sup> The acclaim its makers received prompted Loeb, Levitt, Meyers and Bill Levitt to found their company Film Documents in 1948.<sup>341</sup>

For much of the 1940s and 1950s, then, Levitt was essentially occupied with a second career as a film-maker. As Horak explains, she worked as a producer for Ben Maddow's *The Steps of Age* in 1951, which was made for the National Association for Mental Health and nominated for an Academy Award.<sup>342</sup> In 1952, Levitt directed her own short documentary *Another Light* (a copy of which remains extant in the National Archives), which tells the story of the building of a modern hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey.<sup>343</sup> The film is a piece of well-crafted propaganda on behalf of the need for public investment in major infrastructure. Conceived as a fictive documentary, it launches with a clear statement of its purpose and political allegiances:

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<sup>338</sup> Typescript "The Quiet One: A Conversation about the Film," by Bari Lynn Gilliard and Viki Levitt, June 1976, SFMOMA Archives, Helen Levitt 1991 retrospective files.

<sup>339</sup> Hambourg, op. cit. p.58.

<sup>340</sup> Helen Levitt typed Guggenheim application sheet for 1958, SFMOMA Archives, 1991 Helen Levitt retrospective files.

<sup>341</sup> Horak, op. cit. p.149.

<sup>342</sup> Peter Lewis *The Fifties* (New York: Lippincott, 1978) includes a chapter on "American Documentary in the 1950s" which discusses the 1951 film *Angry Boy* by Irving Jacoby, made with Henwar Rodakiewicz, Willard Van Dyke, and Sidney Meyers as well as the 1951 *The Steps of Age*, produced by Levitt, written and directed by Ben Maddow, and edited by Sidney Meyers.

<sup>343</sup> The film's credit screen indicates that it was funded by the Federal Security Agency Public Health Service, written by William B. Mahoney, produced by William Levitt, directed by Helen Levitt, edited by Helen Levitt and Janice Loeb, with Richard Leacock as cameraman. National Archives film reel 306.5, *Another Light*.

Today, communities throughout the Nation are building urgently needed hospitals of their own with the assistance of State Agencies and the Federal Government. This is the story of one of these hospitals; of its service to the people and of their service to the hospital.

We also know, thanks to Horak's research, that she worked as a camera person on *The Savage Eye* in 1959, produced by Joseph Strick, and directed by Sidney Meyers from a script by Ben Maddow. Finally, she worked as assistant director for Strick on *The Balcony* of 1963 and as producer for Maddow's 1963 melodrama, *An Affair of the Skin*.

All of which is to say that Helen Levitt achieved what so many photographers from the 1930s—not least Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans—dreamed of doing: she successfully moved from the arena of still photography into the very different realm of film-making. In a sense, though, her success as a filmmaker came at a cost to her visibility as a photographer.<sup>344</sup> It is true that her still pictures continued to be available in scattered exhibitions and in publications here and there. For example, in November of 1949 she exhibited work at the Photo League,<sup>345</sup> and in 1948 she produced a photograph that was used in a poster for the Infantile Paralysis foundation (the photograph is preserved in the Library of Congress). A decade later, she also made 55 photographs on commission for the publication *Schoolhouse*, edited by Walter McQuade and subtitled “A primer about the building of the American public school plant produced in the public service by the Joint School Research Project...”<sup>346</sup> And she was included in MOMA's 1955 *Family of Man* show.<sup>347</sup> But the bulk of her creative effort from the late 1940s to the late 1950s was devoted to filmmaking,<sup>348</sup> and so her productivity as a photographer was markedly curtailed until 1959, when she finally re-dedicated herself to still pictures made in the city streets. With the support (at last) of a Guggenheim fellowship, she turned from black and white to color work, and entered what might be considered her third and final career—a topic taken up in subsequent pages.

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<sup>344</sup> It is also the case the what I am calling her “success” as a film-maker was really a partial success, considering that she later disowned almost all of her film work. She also told me that a friend of Janice Loeb's, who was connected with New York City Ballet, had paved the way for the Film Documents group to make a movie about Balanchine, but Levitt refused to go through with the project: “I put my foot down. Everyone in the group [Film Documents] wanted to do it and I said we weren't good enough.” The way that Levitt told the story give me the distinct impression that she was self-conscious about her lack of class and educational privilege: “Balanchine came to Janice's house. We all sat around and talked about it...He was an elegant, brilliant man. I didn't open my mouth. I let Janice do the talking. She was better educated, and she could talk to him better than I could.” Author interview with Levitt, 12.09.2007.

<sup>345</sup> Jane Livingston, *The New York School*, p.280

<sup>346</sup> Walter McCaude; *Schoolhouse: a primer about the building of the American public school plant*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958).

<sup>347</sup> 1958 Guggenheim application typescript, SFMOMA Archives, 1991 Helen LEvitt retrospective files.

<sup>348</sup> She also studied painting at the Art Students League from 1956-1957, according to her 1958 Guggenheim application typescript, *loc. cit.* She told me that her Art Students League teachers included Robert Hale and Georg Grosz, whom she admired but felt was ineffective as a teacher: “What he'd do is to sit at your desk and draw over [your work]—but that's not teaching.” She also took studied with Hans Hoffman in Provincetown. Author interview with Levitt, 12.4.2007.

## **Chapter four: Helen Levitt's Feminism, or the Women at the Window: Re-Gendering Street Photography**

### **Looking beyond the Child**

The main thrust of this dissertation has been concerned with Helen Levitt's photographs of children's art and play, the pictures that first brought her recognition. My goal has been to arrive at a well-articulated sense of what drew her to the child as subject and why these pictures have stood out as her definitive achievement. I think we find that the pictures of urban childhood functioned on multiple levels. They pointed back to the tradition of the street child in documentary production, but they also linked up with a new conception of child photography that catered to the cherished sentiments of the middle-class household. They tapped into an interest in juvenile transgression that crystallized in reformist projects, but they tended to re-direct that frisson of danger toward subtly surrealist purposes. Most of all, they transformed street play from a documentary subject into a kind of implicit paradigm of sociability itself, for they repeatedly emphasize the role of performance and theatricality in everyday life. In sum, the pictures of children could accommodate a host of interpretive needs, not least America's shifting and contested ideologies about class, race, and childhood itself.

But having looked deeply at the pictures of children, I am left wanting to expand the frame, as it were, to encompass the whole of Levitt's work with still photography. This chapter, then, concludes the study by shifting the focus. First, I trace the history of Levitt's return to photography, sketching out some important milestones in Levitt's late period (roughly 1959 to the close of the 1990s, when her photographic activity began to wane in the face of advancing age) and providing a brief discussion of the similarities and differences between the early and late work. I then endeavor to think about the work as a totality by introducing a new, broader question: What makes Levitt's overall body of work—her idiosyncratic archive of city life—a significant and enduring episode in the history of photography? In working to answer that question, I conduct a review of the major critical literature that has attempted to evaluate the nature of Levitt's achievement, pointing to the particular ways in which it has shifted over time. In the final section of this chapter, I proceed to offer what I think is a different way of viewing her archive, one that takes stock of her feminist sense of the streets. Whereas in chapter two I proposed that her Goffman-like attention to the theatricality of social experience counted among her essential cultural contributions, I now foreground her attention to gender and sexuality, building the case that her photography gives us a rare account of the urban streets from a working-class woman's point of view.

#### **I. The return to still photography: Levitt's later work**

Helen Levitt reinvented herself a number of times throughout her career. Having begun as a workaday commercial photographer in a Bronx studio, she transformed herself into a street photographer dedicated to charting the then unmapped territory between the social document and

the surrealist enigma. On the heels of her rapid success as a street photographer, she moved swiftly into film production, carving out a place for herself as an editor, camera person, and co-director. When she returned to street photography in 1959, she once again sought to remake her professional and artistic identity, this time by experimenting with a new formal element: color.

In 1959 and 1960, Levitt received Guggenheim fellowships in support of her experiments with color.<sup>349</sup> As she wrote in her “Concise statement of project”: “I wish to add to the work I have done in black and white still photography by applying the newest techniques of color photography. I am working on a comprehensive book to be executed in and around New York.”<sup>350</sup>

It was unusual for an ambitious photographer at the time to take color processes so seriously. Levitt was ahead of the curve, for color would not become a major formal issue in high art photography until the 1970s. As photography scholar Kevin Moore argues in the recent exhibition catalogue *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, until the 1970s, the assumption prevailed that aesthetically ambitious photographs came in black and white; the monochromatic palette was widely accepted as carrying the imprimatur of art, for it connoted seriousness, “a certain dignity,” and the authority of tradition.<sup>351</sup> Moore elects 1976 as the date when the “lid blew off”<sup>352</sup> of the implicit prohibition against color, citing William Eggleston’s exhibition of that year as the moment when color turned into a heated critical issue. MOMA curator John Szarkowski deemed Eggleston’s color pictures “perfect,” but such critics as Hilton Kramer and Janet Malcolm were outraged by what they saw as a ‘perfectly banal,’ “dull, even tacky” vision.<sup>353</sup> It seems to me that the problem for Kramer and Malcolm was socioeconomic class, which Moore does not discuss.

Moore has reason to treat Eggleston as the turning point, for the critical response to *Photographs by William Eggleston* at MOMA fomented a sense of controversy around the use of color. But Eggleston was not the first photographer to present color photographs in the museum. On the contrary, two years earlier, in 1974, MOMA’s photography curator John Szarkowski had shown Helen Levitt’s color photographs in a slide show format.<sup>354</sup> The decision to present Levitt’s work as projected slides appears to have been driven by economic and practical questions rather than as a self-consciously aesthetic statement,<sup>355</sup> but the choice must have been a

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<sup>349</sup> Morris Hambourg, “Helen Levitt: A Life in Part,” *Helen Levitt*, p.60

<sup>350</sup> 1958 Guggenheim application typescript, SFMOMA Archives, Helen Levitt 1991 retrospective files.

<sup>351</sup> Moore writes: “Black and white had long been the medium associated with both art photography and serious photojournalism. Photographers as wide-ranging as Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus were praised for an art-documentary style founded on an attitude of clear-eyed realism, personal engagement, and individual expression. Though styles differed—Evans adopted frontality and a ‘styleless style;’ Cartier-Bresson a lyrical formalism discovered in the instant; Frank a gritty pessimism; and Arbus a psychological classicism—each of these artists bestowed on their subjects a certain dignity, a sense of heroic struggle (with shades of irony, in Arbus’s case) through formal structuring in black and white.” Kevin D. Moore, James Crump, and Leo Rubinfien, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p.8

<sup>352</sup> *ibid.* p.8

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.* p.8

<sup>354</sup> Nor was Levitt’s the first presentation of color photography in a one-person museum exhibition. Stephen Shore’s 1971 exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the earliest listed in Moore’s ‘Select Chronology of 1970s Color Photography,’ *ibid.* p. 262-263.

<sup>355</sup> Darcie Alexander, *Slide Show: Projected Images in Contemporary Art*, p.119-120. Levitt shot her color work in Ektagraphic slide film and, because of the high cost of color printing, tended to leave them as slides. Darcie Alexander thoughtfully speculates on the implications of the slide format for viewing Levitt’s work: “...though a print underscores intimacy, a projection delivers pictures on a more public level, a feature that reinforces the communal nature of Levitt’s many street photographs. Through slides, the world of the city is transposed to the

provocative way of viewing Levitt's work, for the temporally shifting images would have evoked the experience of walking the streets and encountering passersby who come and go. And even earlier, in March of 1963, MOMA had hosted a special public "Color Slide Program" that presented "aerial photographs by William Garnett, studies of New York street life by Helen Levitt, and micro-photographs by Roman Vishniac," with each photographer offering comments on his or her work.<sup>356</sup> (Alas, there appear to be no further records documenting the event in the MOMA Archives.)

If Levitt's work escaped the kind of critical hostility that greeted Eggleston's show, Moore concludes that it was because she "tactfully inserted color into her own well-established oeuvre of street photography." In other words, Moore argues that her use of color did not shock the bourgeois critics the way that Eggleston's did because her subjects and style had already achieved a degree of familiarity and acceptance. Yet the *Village Voice* capsule review of the 1974 exhibition did not register "tact" so much as a sense of the grotesque and the impure:

Fat, old, weak, crippled, black, white, and funny looking people stare out of windows, sit on stoops, lean against tenements, drag themselves across streets, in this 1960 [sic] set of 40 color slides of New York Street. Purists may feel that great documentary photos still come only in black and white.<sup>357</sup>

The *Village Voice* reviewer was mistaken about the date of the photos; they were not from 1960. For as John Szarkowski explained in the press release for the exhibition: "The highly successful color series of 1959-60 was stolen by a discriminating cat burglar in 1970, which happily forced Miss Levitt to begin again. The slides shown here are selected from those made since 1971."<sup>358</sup> In other words, what we do not know—and unfortunately will never know—is the full scope of the work that Levitt made in color. Once again, Levitt's achievement is occluded because our evidence is woefully fragmentary. From a scholarly perspective, then, the 1960s are a lost decade in Levitt's career.<sup>359</sup> To understand what she accomplished in color, we have only the photographs that date to the 1970s and later. As Morris Hambourg explains, Levitt abandoned color for black and white in the 1980s, citing laboratory costs and unpredictable output as the reasons she grew dissatisfied with color. But by the 1990s, she was working "in either mode."<sup>360</sup>

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gallery—not as isolated pictures hanging in frames, but as a series of constantly moving glimpses that flash and disappear, like the brief engagements people have on the sidewalks and subways of New York." p.120

<sup>356</sup> Press clipping from the *Brooklyn Daily* March 13, 1963, MOMA Archives PI 42,340. See also Darsie Alexander, *Slide Show: Projected Images in Contemporary Art*, (Baltimore, 2005), p.11.

<sup>357</sup> *Village Voice* October 3, 1974 press clipping, MOMA Curatorial File 1074A.

<sup>358</sup> MOMA press release, MOMA curatorial file 1074A.

<sup>359</sup> Here is how Levitt explained the loss of the 1960s work in her 1980 Guggenheim application: "In the late sixties, the selected original slides of my work made possible by the 1959-60 fellowship awards were stolen when my apartment was broken into. These pictures had been seen only once in a slide exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Since no duplicates had yet been made, these pictures are lost. I started a new series of color work in 1971 and I have photographed annually since then during my usual shooting season, April – October. I have been working on what is essentially the same project for almost a decade, and while some of these pictures have been exhibited and published...I still consider this work-in-progress. As I work I discover more and more complexities in the relationship between color, form, and subject, over which I would like to gain complete mastery." 1980 Guggenheim application typescript, SFMOMA Archives, 1991 Helen Levitt retrospective files.

<sup>360</sup> Morris Hambourg, op. cit. p.60.

What exactly did the addition of color mean for her work? According to Levitt, it was a means to amplify the realism that she cherished in photography as a medium. As she put it to me, “Reality is in color.”<sup>361</sup> And Morris Hambourg similarly writes that Levitt “turned to color to edge closer to the illusion of presenting reality itself on paper.”<sup>362</sup> In this way, Levitt’s interest in color can be seen to belong to the resurgence of interest in photographic “transparency and ambiguity” that characterized the general turn to color in the 1970s.<sup>363</sup>

In Morris Hambourg’s view, Levitt’s later work is a continuation of the early vision; despite the interruption of more than a decade’s hiatus from street photography, these later pictures are “variations on the themes of the early period.”<sup>364</sup> Yet Morris Hambourg also acknowledges what Levitt herself was always ready to tell interviewers: that the life visible on the street changed radically from the early 1940s to the 1970s. No longer was it common to see city children treating the stoops, sidewalks, and curbs as their personal playgrounds. According to Levitt, television and air conditioning had brought about a great emptying of street life: “Now it’s hard to go out and find people. You go on the streets now, they’re pretty empty.” Why? “Air conditioning and television.”<sup>365</sup>

One significant difference between the early and late work, then, is Levitt’s lessening attention to children. She made far fewer pictures of children in the color years, focusing more often on adults and even displaying a special interest in the aging body (figure 4.1). Nevertheless, although children stopped being a frequently recurring leitmotif, some of her most powerful later pictures do reiterate the theme of children’s play. Two stand out as particularly forceful examples: figures 4.2 and 4.3. Both show her continuing to explore the themes of relationality and reverie. Like many of her pictures, they are structured as a kind of double-portrait, with the psychological expressivity of the gesturing body given formal support from the inclusion of architectural elements—a frame, a shop window—that evoke a sense of liminality. Coupling the children sets in motion a hint of narrative, an invitation for the viewer to read in to the scene, to brood on the tension between separation and connection inscribed in the space between the two bodies. The hues are sumptuous; their lavish beauty is intriguingly at odds with the otherwise derelict environment. The pictures play with the tension between beauty and awkwardness, between a quietly tender mood of absorptive wonder and a certain hard materiality.

But these two pictures are rather exceptional in her later period. On the whole, I think that the later work evidences some significant differences from the early pictures, though it is difficult to generalize—the late photographs are nothing if not heterogeneous. Perhaps the main difference is that Levitt seems to have come to conceive the streets as a space of comic goofiness rather than of ceremonial theatricality; she appears to have been on the lookout for humorous examples of human awkwardness—recall the *Village Voice* reviewer’s observation about “fat, old, weak, crippled, black, white, and funny looking people.” Levitt herself asserted that “When you get older, things are funnier to you. I see more around me than I used to.”<sup>366</sup> In general, the humor of the late work tends to be broader, and the characters sometimes seem to slide into caricature. Either because her interests shifted or people behaved differently in public space (or

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<sup>361</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.18.2007

<sup>362</sup> Morris Hambourg, *op. cit.* p.60.

<sup>363</sup> Moore, *op. cit.* p.9

<sup>364</sup> Morris Hambourg, *op. cit.* p.61

<sup>365</sup> Author interview, 11.18.2007.

<sup>366</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 6.9.2006.

both at once) the pictures are less frequently anchored to a discrete liminal space. In part, that was because the literal territory was different, as she sought out other kinds of neighborhoods. For example, she made a series of photographs in the garment district, where the day is organized around work rather than leisurely loitering (figure 4.4). Levitt's late pictures reveal a world of changed social mores, a world where fashion had become less formal and space was inhabited in a less communal fashion. The television, air conditioning, and the automobile had reorganized the practices of urban space, and Levitt's photographic practice had to search out other "material" for trying to compose "a proper shot."

## II Ways of Seeing Levitt's Work: The Evolution of the Critical Interpretation

If Levitt's photography has changed noticeably from the early to late periods, so has the critical accounting of her work. In the shift from the 1940s to the 1970s, the critical response has become increasingly aesthetic in its orientation, tending to give less and less weight to the ways in which the pictures speak to and of a specific social reality.

As we saw in chapter three, the first critics, who responded primarily to the pictures of children as they became available through the endorsement of the Museum of Modern Art, tended to offer a rather flexible view of her achievement.<sup>367</sup> Although the literature may have been small, and it was limited to her pictures of children, these early writers could interpret the work as both a formal achievement—a new kind of photographic beauty—and a revelation of the ordinary afflictions of class hierarchy. So it is that in the 1940s we get James Thrall Soby writing in *Minicam* about the "poetry" of Levitt's "split-second" mode of seeing, but also commenting on the pictures' insight into the "psychology of city children in the poorer neighborhoods."<sup>368</sup> We find Lorraine Freimann talking about a "vivid, definite" way of seeing and about "desperate sublimation."<sup>369</sup> We hear John Adam Knight commenting on the "deadly serious" tone of the children's games and the pictures' "perfect patterns of harmony."<sup>370</sup> We see Nancy Newhall selecting Levitt as an exemplar of "great photography" who achieves a "rich and complex counterpoint"<sup>371</sup> but also pointing to the fact that "the children of the poor are not starved and supervised."<sup>372</sup> Their texts register a distinct sense that the question of class (and race) matters to the pictures' significance; in these critics' eyes, the work possesses a latent social critique that only adds to its interest.

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<sup>367</sup> The key early writings by Nancy Newhall, James Thrall Soby, John Adam Knight and Lorraine Freimann were all composed in response to the 1943 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, in which the decision has been made to separate out the pictures of children as an autonomous series. As Nancy Newhall noted in her brief essay, "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children" in 1943: "Miss Levitt's photography is...not confined to children; the Museum [of Modern Art] exhibition was limited arbitrarily to one phase of her work." "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*. 11.4 (April) 1943, p.8-9.

<sup>368</sup> James Thrall Soby, "The Art of Poetic Accident: The photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt," *Minicam*, March 1943, p.28-31 and 95.

<sup>369</sup> Freimann, Lorraine. "Photo Display At Art Museum Considered Outstanding Exhibit," Fort Wayne Indiana Journal Gazette, March 19, 1944. MOMA Archives, Curatorial Exhibition file II.1.46.2

<sup>370</sup> "She makes her pictures where and as she finds them and lets composition take care of itself—a practice followed with not little success by stars in the heavens, wildflowers in the woods and birds in flight. Like all of these, her pictures are perfect patterns of harmony and living interest." "Review by John Adam Knight," *U.S. Camera* May 1943, vol. 6 #4, p.17.

<sup>371</sup> Nancy Newhall, "Four Photographs," *Magazine of Art*, May 1943 (Vol. 36 #4), p.180-182.

<sup>372</sup> Nancy Newhall, "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children" op. cit.

That flexible mode of interpretation continued at least through 1950, when the League's newsletter *Photo Notes* published a review of Levitt's work by Joseph Solman. His text glosses the pictures of children as inversions of the expectation that childhood is a time of sunny innocence, and links that ironic reversal to social environment:

In several prints showing boys at play with masked faces, the sense of prying into some primitive rite oppresses the spectator. In another print, a three-year old girl crouches over her windowsill with a wild burning stare in her eyes. Whatever unholy event she is witnessing in the street we can never know, but a traumatic instant in the child's life has been fixed forever. An unforgettable portrait is that of a harrowed, nervous-looking woman (perhaps all of eight years old) standing before a dark doorway with a lily in one hand. There is a print of two doll-like infants who occupy places on the mud-guard and radiator hood of a truck, dreaming for all the world as though they lay in a shrouded garden. Prints like these make us realize a 'displaced persons' camp can settle in any sordid environment, can grow in one's own home.<sup>373</sup>

For Solman, the photographs reveal the "traumas" of an urban existence that, in its miseries and "sordid[ness]," is somehow equivalent to a "'displaced persons' camp." He evokes the horrors of twentieth-century political catastrophes as the necessary context for thinking about these pictures, and in doing so he implies that the work's significance resides in its psychological and political suggestiveness—in the ways in which the pictures portend but do not explicate a condition of crisis, perhaps even despair.

In ensuing decades, this sense of the work's sociopolitical resonance tended to dissipate. In the 1960s and 1970s, James Agee and critics who followed in his wake would mostly argue that her pictures ought to be appreciated on solely aesthetic terms. There was a steady de-politicizing of interpretation, which was so persuasive that by the time the German scholar Andrea Henkens came to write her recent dissertation on Levitt, she could assert that "social or political intentions do not allow themselves to be drawn from these pictures."<sup>374</sup>

### James Agee on Levitt's Lyricism

James Agee's prodigious gifts as a writer, and his close friendship with Levitt, made him an especially authoritative interpreter of her work. In 1946, Agee composed the introductory essay for what would become Levitt's important book of photographs, *A Way of Seeing*. Due to publishing problems and delays, the book and its accompanying essay by Agee did not appear on the market until 1965 (hence, I did not include it in chapter 3's analysis of the initial reception of the early pictures).<sup>375</sup> But we need to consider Agee as one of the key formulators of the view of Levitt's work that we inherit today.

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<sup>373</sup> Joseph Solman, "Helen Levitt: A Review," *Photo Notes*, Spring 1950, pp.13-15. This review was probably a response to the exhibition of Levitt's work at the Photo League in 1949, which is reported by Livingston, *The New York School*, p.280.

<sup>374</sup> Andrea Henkens, *Flanerie in der Grossstadt*. p.10.

<sup>375</sup> Max Kozloff explains the circumstances around the book's delay in footnote 3 to his essay, "A Way of Seeing and the Act of Touching: Helen Levitt's Photographs of the Forties" in *The Privileged Eye*, 1987. He writes: "The initial book was to be brought out by Reynolds and Hitchcock in the forties, but was shelved when one of the partners died. Helen Levitt states that she thought little more about the project for twenty years, until it was



It was Agee, for example, who emphasized the notion of Levitt as a “lyric” photographer, a term that has stuck. (It resurfaces, for example, in the 1990s, in Sandra Phillips’s account of Levitt’s work on the occasion of the photographer’s first comprehensive retrospective, discussed below and in chapter 3.) For Agee, the term “lyrical” is meant to secure Levitt’s position as an artist of the camera, and to differentiate her work from the great mass of photographic production that he views as “corrupt[ions],” “defile[ments]” and “destructions” of our “ability to see.”<sup>376</sup> Offering “lyrical” as an open-ended label, Agee links Levitt’s “way of seeing” to the heightened imagery and special intensity of poetry. To call her work “lyrical” is to suggest that it possesses beauty and visionary power, but also modesty—the lyric, after all, is a short poem characterized by a special musicality and by an effusion of emotion (by “subjectivity and sensuality”<sup>377</sup>), and the term is often used in contradistinction to the more public genre of the epic poem.

Agee does make an effort to pin down his elusive notion of a “lyric photography” by specifically differentiating two opposing categories of photographic seeing: what he calls the “monumental, static” work of Mathew Brady, Eugene Atget, and Walker Evans versus the “volatile,” kinetic, and “transient” imagery of Cartier-Bresson and Levitt, which he groups under the heading of “lyric.” In setting up this dialectic, he is surely drawing from James Thrall Soby’s “The Art of Poetic Accident: the Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt,” which makes much of the opposition of the “view camera men” versus the “the hand camera’s” concern for “spontaneity and motion.”<sup>378</sup> He is also rehearsing the terms that Lincoln Kirstein deployed in 1947 to discuss Cartier-Bresson’s work.<sup>379</sup> But Agee’s opposition of lyric to “monumental” may also imply a certain gender coding, by which the “lyric” stirs associations with the private, the affective, and the beautiful—hence, the feminine—as opposed to the “epic” world of the public, the historical, and the sublime—or that which is traditionally designated as masculine.

I will have much more to say about the question of gender in relation to Levitt’s work. But for now, my point is that Agee’s essay offers an appreciation—a panegyric—which celebrates its subject by elevating the work above the great mass of photographic production and at the same time circumscribing it within a specifically aesthetic label.

In constructing Levitt as an artist, Agee attributes to her a “purity,” suggesting the moral rectitude of someone who works without any concern for market forces or even any deliberation; she becomes an exemplar of the modernist ideal of the artist-naïf:

Most of these photographs are about as near the pure spontaneity of true folk art as the artist, aware of himself [sic] as such, can come; and an absolute minimum of intellection,

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suggested that Viking produce it. The title, from a sentence in the accompanying unpublished essay by James Agee, was proposed by Catherine Carver at Viking.” p.42

<sup>376</sup> Agee’s essay begins thus: “The sense of sight has been served and illuminated by the visual arts for as long, almost, as we have been human. For a little over a hundred years, it has also been served by the camera. Well used, the camera is unique in its power to develop and to delight our ability to see. Ill or indifferently used, it is unique in its power to defile and to destroy that ability....It is probably on the conservative side to estimate that during the past ten to fifteen years the camera has destroyed a thousand pairs of eyes, corrupted ten thousand, and seriously deceived a hundred thousand, for every one pair that it has opened, and taught.” Helen Levitt and James Agee, *A Way of Seeing*. (New York: Horizon Press, 1981), p. 3.

<sup>377</sup> *The American Heritage College Dictionary*. 2d College Edition. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).

<sup>378</sup> James T. Soby, “The Art of Poetic Accident,” op. cit., p.2-30 and 95.

<sup>379</sup> In his essay “Henri Cartier-Bresson: Documentary Humanist,” Lincoln Kirstein discusses the photographer’s “lyric values.” *The Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1947), p. 8.

of technical finesse, or of any kind of direction or interference on the part of the artist as artist stands between the substance and the emotion and their communication.<sup>380</sup>

Agee's essay thus projects a profoundly idealizing (but also slightly condescending?) view of Levitt as an artist. He uses the richness of his prose style to weave about her an atmosphere thick with romanticism.

Nowhere is Agee's essay more strangely romantic and puzzling than when he addresses—or perhaps deflects—her commitment to portraying working class life and racial diversity. I will need to quote him at length, for his words present a tight knot of images and ideas, which are difficult to disentangle:

It is...worth noticing that nearly all the people in her photographs are poor; that most of them are of the relatively volatile strains; that many are children. It is further worth realizing that there is a logic and good sense about this, so far as her work is concerned. The poor have more children than the well-to-do; and the southern-blooded poor have more children than those of northern blood; the adults among the poor and southern-blooded are more childlike than the northern-blooded or the well-to-do; in children and adults alike, of this pastoral stock, there is more spontaneity, more grace, less guardedness and bitterness, than among human beings of any other kind; and of all city streets, theirs are most populous in warm weather, and most abundant in variety and in beauty, in strangeness and in humor. A great lyric artist might still possibly find much, among people and buildings of the middle and rich classes, to turn to pure lyrical account. But it seems hardly necessary to point out that flowers grow much more rarely in that soil, perhaps especially in this country at this time, than weeds and cactuses; and that there is much more in that territory to interest the artist who is fascinated by irony, diagnosis, and the terrifying complexities of self-deceit and of evil, than there is for the lyrical artist. I cannot believe it is meaningless that with a few complicated exceptions, our only first-rate contemporary lyrics have gotten their life at the bottom of the human sea: aside from Miss Levitt's work I can think of little outside the best of jazz. Moreover, specialized as her world is, it seems to me that Miss Levitt has worked in it in such a way that it stands for much more than itself; that is, in fact, a whole and round image of existence. These are pastoral people, persisting like wild vines upon the intricacies of a great city, a phantasmagoria of all that is most contemporary in hardness of material and of appetite. In my opinion they embody with great beauty and fullness not only their own personal and historical selves but also, in fundamental terms, a natural history of the soul, which I presume to be warm-blooded, and pastoral, and as a rule, from its first conscious instant onward, as fantastically misplanted in the urgent metropolis of the body, as the body in its world.<sup>381</sup>

What exactly is Agee proposing in this cascade of ornate imagery? To use today's critical lingo, he is thoroughly naturalizing the social differences of race and class. He literally relies on metaphors of nature—"wild vines," "weeds and cactuses," "the bottom of the human sea"—and the invocation of pastoral archetypes to detach Levitt's work from the domain of the political so as to situate it in a timeless realm of the "natural history of the soul." In doing so, he depends

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<sup>380</sup> Levitt and Agee, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>381</sup> *ibid.* p. 73-74.

upon the cultural trope of the poor as noble savages (as we saw Nancy Newhall do in chapter three), who reproduce in some kind of animal-like innocence. Agee's interpretation thus relies on a mystification of poverty, which in turn makes Levitt's work more susceptible to a purely aesthetic reading.

I take Agee's carefully composed paean to be the founding moment when Levitt's work began to be framed as a primarily aesthetic achievement. Following from Agee, numerous critics in the later years would repeat the dictum that Levitt's work is ostensibly without a politics, "lyrical" to the exclusion of being socially critical.

Agee's became the dominant account in part because few other writers of his stature weighed in on Levitt's work for many years (and of course because the passionate virtuosity of his verbal pyrotechnics was so enthralling). As I have discussed, Levitt abandoned still photography to focus on film-making in the late 1940s through the 1950s, which precluded her from being an active presence in the art world. Little additional writing on her work was produced until the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art jointly mounted a major retrospective of her work, which subsequently toured across the U.S. Nevertheless, two brief but important additions to the literature on Levitt emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Each represents a sophisticated effort to dissect her work's significance.

### **Hellman and Hoshino: The Properties of the Medium**

In 1978, Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino collaborated on an essay titled "The Photographs of Helen Levitt" for *The Massachusetts Review's* special issue on photography, edited by Jerome Liebling. Hellman and Hoshino's text is concerned primarily with formal configuration and the nature of photography as a medium. Following from Clement Greenberg's famous proposition that the work of modern art had been "hunted back to its medium," they argue that Levitt's achievement has to do with her understanding of photography's intrinsic properties. In building their argument, they posit the 1930s as a signal moment in photography's history, when a distinctive school of photography practitioners emerged, among whom they include Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bill Brandt, Andre Kertesz, Ben Shahn, and Helen Levitt. Hellman and Hoshino present these photographers as the first generation of camera workers to truly understand, embrace, and manifest what they call the medium's "autographic" nature. Their analysis focuses in particular on the operations of chance as a key component of photographic seeing, or accidental formal echoes that take on a strange potency, an irrational fascination, within the space of the photograph. They argue that chance—what Walter Benjamin called "the tiny spark of contingency"<sup>382</sup> that animates a photograph—and transparency are two definitive attributes of the medium and by-products of its automatism. Ultimately, they conclude that Levitt was neither a concerned humanist engaging in a socially-minded project nor a bourgeois *artiste* concerned with self-expression but a photographer with a rare understanding of the nature of photography.<sup>383</sup>

This argument, with its tendency to locate the merits of the work in Levitt's insight into the nature of her medium, tends to limit (perhaps unintentionally) the interest of her work to a small circle of photography aficionados, to make of her a photographer's photographer whose

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<sup>382</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," *One Way Street and Other Writings*, (London: New Left Books, 1979), p.243

<sup>383</sup> Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino, "The Photographs of Helen Levitt," *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter 1978, p.729-731.

work has little to say about the social life she dedicated herself to observing in the city streets. The reading of the photograph becomes an exercise in savoring the operations of photography—a rather academic enterprise. What drops out is Levitt’s abiding interest in portraiture, in the photograph as an affectively charged encounter with the complexity of another’s subjectivity. It is true that Levitt evinced a deep interest in the uncanny realism of the photograph—what Hellman and Hoshino call its transparency—but the overwhelming bulk of the pictorial evidence suggests that her realism was always in the service of a fascination with the human face and body, with the expressivity of gesture and movement, and with the significance of affective relationships. She was a portraitist of the working class who used the power of the telling gesture to transform the still photograph into something close to the film still.

### **Kozloff: The Authority of Authenticity**

One of the richest, most thoughtful assessments of Levitt’s achievement that we currently have is Max Kozloff’s essay, “A Way of Seeing and the Act of Touching: Helen Levitt’s Photographs of the Forties,” published in his 1987 anthology of criticism, *The Privileged Eye*. Kozloff’s essay is conceived as a response to the book, *A Way of Seeing*—he bases his comments on the 1981 Horizon press edition—but his attentive reading of Levitt’s book provides an occasion for him to reflect on the practice of street photography in general. Kozloff argues that street photography as a genre works to negate the “stereotypes of photography for hire.”<sup>384</sup> It is the antithesis of the commercial media’s seductive artifice, and as such it is, for Kozloff, a preserve of authenticity within a photographic culture that is largely dedicated to deceit:

...street photography acts as a critique of the corporate hypocrisies of photographic culture and opposes its setups, hypes, and unfair samplings—its normal deceits—by hard-won standards of authentic observation....

Underlying street photography is a naturalist argument that goes something like this: The value of the picture resides in its truthful observations. This value is jeopardized to the extent the photographer intervenes in the social circumstances, causing a rupture from what would naturally have happened.<sup>385</sup>

In Kozloff’s line of thinking, Levitt is an exemplary street photographer—he calls her “a quintessential modern street photographer”—because she so successfully “integrates the moral goal of credibility, the philosophical notion of contingency, and the professional requirement of freedom and spontaneity.”<sup>386</sup> This position holds that Levitt’s achievement has to do with her extraordinary discretion, her ability not to impose her ego onto her subjects. By refraining from factitious embellishment, her pictures afford us a sense that we glimpse reality itself.

Kozloff’s interpretation thus has something in common with Agee’s, for both men see her work as a shining example of veracity and credibility within an otherwise deceitful visual culture. And this honesty or authenticity is further bolstered by an emotional delicacy. Kozloff

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<sup>384</sup> Kozloff, op. cit. p.30.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.. p. 30.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid. p.31

writes that “One cares about her subjects because the photographer makes us feel they are seen with a caring eye.”<sup>387</sup>

Among Kozloff’s contributions, one of the more intriguing is his pinpointing of recurrence as an important element in Levitt’s work, and in street photography in general. Kozloff explains that

...recurrence, as a picture making strategy, works as a form of corroboration of data, themes, or attitudes spread through large arrays of images. On the other hand, recurrence simplifies the stylistic and conceptual demands imposed by a pictorial mode that is basically atomistic in its characteristic results. Raw material is acted upon, approached, and edited to suggest the illusion of an emergent pattern of scattered events.”

By employing recurrence or repetition, the photographer has recourse to the rhetorical strategy of emphasis through reiteration, which allows a coherent vision of the world to be built out of the “atomistic” fragments of discontinuous photographic views. Kozloff invites us to ponder recurrence as a pictorial “strategy” in order to help us recognize that, in Levitt’s oeuvre, the act of touching functions as a recurrent motif, one of the distinguishing refrains that organize her “way of seeing”:

[*A Way of Seeing*] depicts not only the sputtering charades of black kids and white ones but the kibitzing of their elders, graffiti and the loafing and hugging that goes on among family and friends with time on their hands during the dog days of the New York summer...[33]

*A Way of Seeing* shows people’s recurrent need to touch each other, to pair, as it might be, or to act together in groups.

Kozloff further ties this interest in the act of touching to a kind of ethnographically-specific cultural sensibility, proposing that the “physical[ly] demonstrative” culture of Catholic and Jewish New York stands in opposition to the different mores of the “Protestant hinterland.”

Interestingly, Kozloff’s close attention to patterns of recurrence, along with his concern for the special characteristics of street photography as a genre, leads him to interpret Levitt’s work in the kind of flexible terms that we saw in the first criticism that appeared in the 1940s. For Kozloff, Levitt’s concern for “nuances” over “conditions”<sup>388</sup> does not necessarily exclude the possibility of reading these photographs with a socially aware eye:

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid. p.32.

<sup>388</sup> Kozloff compares Levitt’s appreciation for urban childhood to Lewis Hine’s, writing that “In Hine’s output, one is struck by the feeling that too much wisdom, and too much hardship of the kind that instills such wisdom, has been imposed by a harsh environment on those too young to absorb what it means. Their innocence is eerily stunted. Hine’s children are at work, or they pose in the workplace, a hellish community in which they’ve been burdened far too soon by callous bosses and an indifferent society. For their part, Helen Levitt’s youngsters, involved in play, are small, explosive parentheses on weary and alien streets. The good cheer, if not the festive savagery, of these juveniles is touchingly out of place. Levitt has in common with Hine a grimy, earthy view of the urban background, but she does not elaborate upon it as material distress. What he reported were ‘conditions,’ what she discovers are ‘nuances.’” p.32-33

From this [book's] composite of unlike but naturally related situations, no one emphasis declares itself sufficiently to be read as centrally important. To questions of whether this is an album chiefly about an urban season, about how streets are populated by their communities, the sociology of ghettos, the fantasies of children, or the way parents and their offspring deal with each other, the photographs frequently answer yes and no at the same time. Or rather, the whole range of these topics can be made implicit in individual pictures, lightly, though, and strewn about. [p33]

With their “light” touch, then, Levitt’s pictures are interesting precisely for their openness to interpretation. They do not direct a single tendentious reading; instead, their essential ambiguity invites, even demands, a quizzical kind of viewing. The pictures hint at “the eruptive power of a crowded underclass” [p.34] at the same time that they refuse to “spell out” their political implications.

Yet when the time came for Levitt’s work to be assessed on the occasion of her first major retrospective, in 1991, Kozloff’s sense of the work’s productive equivocation—its “yes and no”—did not prevail. As pointed out in chapter three, the gifted scholars Sandra S. Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg, who were charged with explaining the merits of Levitt’s work to the museum-going public, foreclosed on political readings of the work by resurrecting Agee’s notion of “lyricism.” Emphasizing the pictures’ beauty and poetry, their two essays treat the signs of social hierarchy—the visible markers of class, race, and gender—as incidental to the work’s significance. Sandra Phillips situates Levitt’s work in relation to an iconography of the city, setting it in contrast to Le Corbusier’s (and Robert Moses’s) modernist city of tomorrow. She insightfully suggests that we see Levitt’s work as a kind of pictorial analogue to Jane Jacobs’s celebration of the vitality of sidewalk culture:

[Levitt’s] poeticizing of ordinary street life is similar to Jane Jacobs’s perception of an order, complex and subtle, found on the street, of which she said: ‘This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city, and liken it to the dance.’

Picking up on the notion of street photography as a dance, Morris Hambourg gives us a Levitt whose impact resides in her extraordinary facility for choreographing space and gesture into enchanting formal arrangements. Applying a connoisseur’s eye to the task of interpreting Levitt’s achievement, Morris Hambourg emphasizes the photographer’s relation to canonical figures like Cartier-Bresson and offers us elegant explanations of the pictures’ uncommon grace. That is to say, she gives Levitt a prestigious art historical pedigree and a place in the pantheon of photography’s greats

It is perhaps predictable that an exhibition catalogue sponsored by two major museums would frame Levitt’s career as a thoroughly aesthetic achievement. The process of museumification, if you will, demands the creation and maintenance of artistic canons, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau has so forcefully argued.<sup>389</sup> The institutional role of the museum is tightly bound to the discursive formulation of art as an elite and autonomous enterprise. So it is not surprising that the 1991 exhibition catalogue frames the work’s significance as first and foremost a question of photographic aesthetics. And these two capable scholars may well have

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<sup>389</sup> See “Canon Fodder: Authorizing Eugene Atget” in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic Histories, Institutions, and Practices*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.28-51.

been responding on some level to the politics of gender, seeking a way to validate Levitt's status, after her long hiatus, by establishing her place alongside such celebrated male figures as Cartier-Bresson and Evans.

Moreover, there is every reason to believe that Levitt herself wanted her exhibition catalogue to stress aesthetics over politics. By the time Sandra Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg conducted their research interviews, the photographer usually disavowed any political meaning for her work. In my interviews with her, Levitt told me that she had initially been intrigued by photography's potential as an instrument of social critique, but that Walker Evans had "disabused me of that."<sup>390</sup> Yet as we saw in chapter three, it is not so easy to square Levitt's statements that her work is not about "social conditions" with the ways in which her work pictures were viewed, discussed, and circulated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. As I have shown, the politics of race and class informed the earliest publication, selection, and interpretation of her work. From the perspective of a post Civil Rights era, it is easy to overlook the race-and-class consciousness that undergirds a picture like figure 4.5, with its tender, quietly idealizing scene of four young flâneuses pursuing a stray flock of bubbles. Moreover, the gendered implications of the word "flâneuse" points to the need to expand what counts as the pictures' politics to include yet another political axis: the gender politics of the street, and more specifically the sexual politics of looking.

### III. Levitt's Feminist Sense of the Streets

As of this writing, then, we possess a number of different views on Levitt's achievement. There tends to be widespread agreement that her pictures are extraordinary for their authenticity and artistry—their sense of truth and beauty. All the writers recognize that she devoted herself to a carefully delimited photographic territory, photographing the racial and social underclass of Mexico and New York to the exclusion of all other social groups—though there are different views about how much political significance inheres in that abiding commitment. What I think is largely missing from the literature on Levitt, though, is a carefully articulated understanding of the *gender* politics that inform her vision.

Sandra Phillips was the first to recognize that Levitt was "something of a feminist,"<sup>391</sup> but Phillips left the implications of that feminism undeveloped. Andrea Henkens likewise asserts that Levitt's work reflects the perspective of a woman, but she does not explicate the point.<sup>392</sup> Building on these initial observations of Phillips and Henkens, I want to propose that Levitt's feminism was more than incidental to her way of seeing the modern streets. On the contrary, I believe that among her most significant contributions to the history of photography has been her ability to portray the urban streets from the point of view of a working-class woman.

To perceive, understand, and appreciate Levitt's feminist sense of the streets, we need to excavate the ways in which gender has tended to operate in the history of street photography. The streets have been a special, symbolically charged site of the modernist imaginary—from Charles Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin, from Eugene Atget to Garry Winogrand—but the

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<sup>390</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2008. When thinking about Levitt's statements distancing herself from political motivations, we should also remember that her friends Sid Grossman and Ben Maddow were both victims of the communist witch hunts, as discussed in chapter one.

<sup>391</sup> Sandra Phillips, 1991 exhibition catalogue, op. cit. p.19.

<sup>392</sup> Andrea Henkens, op. cit. p.143. Henkens links Levitt's work to the idea of flânerie, as I do in the section below, but she does not discuss it in terms of the feminist debate about the gender of the flâneur. She also asserts that Levitt's was not a "sexualized way of seeing," a point that I dispute in later sections of this chapter.

dominant tradition of street photography has largely been framed in androcentric terms, around the male archetype of the flâneur. Levitt's photographs, with their gynocentric account of urban life, reimagine the traditional gendering of the street and add a distinctly feminist chapter to street photography's history. For Levitt gives us a vision of the streets infused with a feminist take on desire, looking, and sociability in public space.

### **The City Streets & the Modernist Imaginary: The Flâneur, the Flâneuse, and the History of Street Photography**

The city streets have electrified the imaginations of countless photographers, writers, and artists since the rapid urbanization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for they are the site where strangers mingle, encountering each other in a fluid spectacle of moving bodies. The urban street is more than a geographical configuration; it is a psychosocial climate,<sup>393</sup> a site of political confrontation, and a crucible of modernity itself.

To understand street photography, then, we need to grasp the special status of the urban streets within the modernist imaginary. In their book, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*, Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz help to do that by tracing street photography as an idea back to the nineteenth century fascination with the flâneur (as well as a second, closely related archetype whom they identify as the baudad). The flâneur represents both a social type and a literary trope. According to Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, one of the first important literary treatments of the flâneur came in journalist Victor Fournel's "remarkable" book of 1858, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris*, "in which the metaphor of the street as theater was sustained for several hundred pages."<sup>394</sup> According to Fournel, the flâneur is a "walker in the city" and a "connoisseur of the street, someone with an appreciation for its drama that he expressed through his flânerie."

Since Fournel's time, the flâneur has grown to become a heavily mythologized, often invoked, but remarkably elusive figure in critical assessments of modernity.<sup>395</sup> There have been many incarnations of the flâneur, but he is almost invariably imagined as a *he*—as when he appears in Charles Baudelaire's foundational essay, "the Painter of Modern Life."<sup>396</sup> Baudelaire links the flâneur's love of the urban spectacle to the urbanity of the new modern artist:

"Observer, philosopher, flâneur —call him what you will...The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become

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<sup>393</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. Richard Sennett, (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1969).

<sup>394</sup> Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: a history of street photography*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), p.40

<sup>395</sup> As Keith Tester writes in his introduction to *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994): "Because the flâneur is fundamentally a figure who can only be known through the activities of flânerie, a certain mystery is intrinsic to his identity. Baudelaire himself mentioned 'those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions...In himself, the flâneur is, in fact, a very obscure thing.'" p.7

<sup>396</sup> Tester explains that "Baudelaire is quite explicit about the gender identity of the poet much, if not indeed all, of Baudelaire's work presupposes a masculine narrator or observer." *ibid.* p.2



one flesh with the crowd....to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world."<sup>397</sup>

Baudelaire's masculine flâneur is a key figure in histories of modernity, not least in the complex texts of Walter Benjamin, who took the character as an avatar of modern urban experience.<sup>398</sup> For both Baudelaire and Benjamin, the flâneur delights in soaking up the kaleidoscopic stimuli of the streets, the phantasmagoria of the shopping arcades, and transmuting them into a distinctively modern mode of perception and representation:

By way of flânerie—a mode of movement that is at the same time a process of reflection a manner of walking with an attendant presence of mind, and close attention to images—the flâneur transcends modern alienation through an epistemological process of intensive perception. He is at once dreamer, a historian, and an artist of modernity, a character, a reader, and an author who transforms his observations into literary, or more precisely, latently filmic texts. Collecting scenes and impressions, he then relates them through stories and histories of the city and its streets. Surrounded by visual stimuli and relying on the encompassing power of his perception, the flâneur moves freely in the streets, intent solely on pursuing this seemingly unique and individual experience of reality.<sup>399</sup>

Flânerie, on some level, is another name for the activity of street photography, which is predicated on the ability to “move freely in the streets” in order to enjoy “collecting scenes and impressions.” Or, to put it another way, street photography adopts, fulfills, and extends the passion for flânerie that Baudelaire saw as the wellspring of modern art and poetry. Westerbeck and Meyerowitz are surely right to root the tradition of street photography in the idea of the flâneur, the culture of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, and more specifically in that era's rich literary and artistic interest in the spectacle of the streets as it is enjoyed by the flâneur, the quintessential 19<sup>th</sup> century observer. But in doing so, they take it for granted, and leave unexamined, the assumption that the flâneur is necessarily a male figure, someone who enjoys the prerogative to wander the streets freely and even more than that, who claims the privilege to look, to stare, to gape and to enjoy the spectacle. Missing from their account is any reference to the lively, feminist debate which has closely re-examined the gender of the flâneur, and asked: Can there be a female flânerie? Is there a flâneuse?

### **The Problem of the Flâneuse: A Critical Genealogy**

Posing that question in 1985, the cultural critic Janet Wolff published a germinal essay titled “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” in which she argues

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<sup>397</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” as translated and quoted in Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, op. cit. p. 40.

<sup>398</sup> For an understanding of Benjamin's notion of the flâneur, I am relying on Susan Buck-Morss, “*The Flâneur the Sandwichman, and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering*,” *New German Critique* 39 (Fall 1986): 99-140; Anne Freidberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); and Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.3.

<sup>399</sup> Anke Gleber, “Women on the Screens and Streets of Modernity: In Search of the Female Flâneur,” in Dudley Andrew, ed. *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p.55.

that “The influential writings of Baudelaire, Simmel, Benjamin, and more recently, Richard Sennett and Marshall Berman, by equating the *modern* with the *public*... fail to describe women’s experience of modernity.”<sup>400</sup> She goes on to examine in detail Baudelaire and Benjamin’s shared fascination with the flâneur, who goes “botanizing on the asphalt,” and the ways in which both writers take him to be the very personification of modern urban life’s new “conditions of involvement/non-involvement.”<sup>401</sup> Her point is that the flâneur has been exclusively a male figure in the literature of modernity, for his freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rested on the gendered separation of the spheres into a public (male) world and a private (female) domestic realm. Acknowledging that “The real situation of women in the second half of the nineteenth century was more complex than one of straightforward confinement to the home,” she nevertheless asserts that in general, and in terms of the dominant literary tropes of modernity, “the solitary and independent life of the flâneur was not open to women.”<sup>402</sup> She concludes by noting:

What is missing in this literature [of modernity] is any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of ‘the modern’ in its private manifestations, and also of the very different nature of the experience of those women who *did* appear in the public arena: a poem written by *la femme passante* about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps.

Since Wolff’s foundational inquiry into the (non)existence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century flâneuse, there has been a deluge of critical writing on the problem of gender in the construction of the flâneur. Griselda Pollock, to cite another important example, has echoed Wolff’s conviction that “there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure, the flâneur” there is not and could not be a flâneuse.”<sup>403</sup>

Is the flâneuse a cultural impossibility? Pollock and Wolff’s initial diagnosis has, for many writers, come to seem too sweeping. Recent feminist thinkers have modified the declaration of the non-existence of the flâneuse to “the more cautious observation that there was not *supposed* to be a female flâneur, and that not *many* women managed or dared to exceed...prevailing prohibitions” on the free use of public space.<sup>404</sup> Moreover, Wolff and Pollock have been critiqued for a tendency to “overlook the flâneur’s inherent contradictions” because they “blur historical actuality with [the figure’s] use as a cultural, critical phenomenon.”<sup>405</sup> In other words, they conflate the historical and the rhetorical existences of the flâneur. And recently a number of scholars have purported to find the female flâneur in the department stores of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>406</sup> As Ann Freidberg wittily puts it, “The department

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<sup>400</sup> Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37-46.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44

<sup>403</sup> Griselda Pollock, ‘Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,’ in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 50-90, p.71.

<sup>404</sup> Anke Gleber, “Women on the Screens and Streets of Modernity: In Search of the Female Flâneur,” in Dudley Andrew, ed., *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 55-85, p.61

<sup>405</sup> Parsons, op. cit.. p.5

<sup>406</sup> Ann Freidberg explains that “The female flâneur, the flâneuse, was not possible until she was free to roam the city on her own. And this was equated with the privilege of shopping on her own. The development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of shopping as a socially acceptable leisure activity for bourgeois women, as a ‘pleasure rather than a necessity,’ encouraged women to be peripatetic, without escort...It wasn’t until the closing decades of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century that the department store became a safe haven for unchaperoned women.” p.36

store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the the flâneur's last coup, but it was the flâneuse's first."<sup>407</sup>

Yet setting up the department store as the site of female flânerie is unsatisfactory in many ways. For one, it restricts the focus to the consumer entertainments of the privileged, leaving out of the equation the experience of working class women, for whom the shops would have been a site of labor—as they were for Levitt, who worked at Gimbel's department store in the early 1930s. Moreover, there is a strong argument to be made that a flânerie of the department store is a pale substitute for unrestricted access to the fascinations of the city streets. As Akke Gleber writes, "The territories of such preliminary and rudimentary forms of 'flânerie'—the preoccupied strolling and shopping of a female consumer—have to be regarded, in view of the vast terrain of existing real city spaces, as decidedly circumscribed and distinctly derivative."<sup>408</sup>

To find a robust form of female flânerie, the feminist quest for the flâneuse needs to go beyond 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, where social and cultural restrictions severely circumscribed women's ability to claim a place in public space or the pleasures of urban spectatorship.<sup>409</sup> Women gained increasing, if only partial, access to the public sphere as the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>, and Helen Levitt's New York was open to women in a way that 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris was not. Historical changes in gender mores and sexual customs prepared the way for Levitt to fashion herself into a flâneuse of New York City. As Kathy Peiss has so effectively shown, between 1880 and 1920, New York's working class women, who labored in "the city's factories, shops, and department stores," enjoyed new kinds of opportunities to spend some of their earnings on "the lively entertainments of the streets, public dance halls, and other popular amusements." The working class daughters of immigrants—among whom we should include Levitt and her mother—navigated metropolitan life with a freedom to pursue pleasure on their own terms.<sup>410</sup> Indeed, Levitt liked to reminisce about her youthful escapades enjoying New York City's "cheap amusements." She spoke animatedly about the pleasures of the mechanical rides at Steeplechase in Coney Island,<sup>411</sup> about riding the length of Manhattan on the top of the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue double decker bus, about frequenting dances "at the Savoy up in Harlem. You'd pick up a guy and you'd dance. I loved it."<sup>412</sup>

At the same time, it is worth remembering that even today, the freedom to enjoy public space remains asymmetrically gendered. As an emblem of the persistent obstacles to female flânerie, consider Ruth Orkin's famous photograph "An American Girl in Italy" (fig. 4.6), in which a young woman is subjected to a gauntlet of stares, cat-calls, and leering remarks as she attempts to navigate the space of the streets. Orkin's photograph focuses intently on the sexual politics of looking and being looked at that have structured the gendered experience of public space in modernity. Another incisive example is Laurie Anderson's *Fully Automated Nikon (Object/Objection/Objectivity)* of 1973, a conceptual art piece in which the artist used the

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid. p. 37

<sup>408</sup> Gleber, op. cit. p.59

<sup>409</sup> Women "did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize, or watch." Pollock, op. cit., p.71.

<sup>410</sup> Peiss tells us that working class women of the period 1880-1920 "dressed in the latest finery, negotiated city life with ease, and sought intrigue and adventure with male companions. For this group of working women, sexuality became a central dimension of their emergent culture..." " 'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920" in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, ed. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983). See also Peiss *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>411</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 12.8.2007

<sup>412</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 2.26.2007.

“camera as weapon” in a new way: as a kind of counter-aggression to moments of harassment encountered in the city street.<sup>413</sup>

The problem of the flâneuse, then, goes beyond the question of whether she exists. The more interesting question, I think, is: How is urban spectatorship inflected by gender? Asking that question can help us to recognize the role of gender in the tradition of street photography, and more particularly to appreciate the ways in which Levitt’s work playfully subverts the normative scripts for gendered looking in the urban spectacle. Let me explain what I mean by comparing two photographs, one by Helen Levitt (fig. 4.7) and another by the French photographer Robert Doisneau (fig. 4.8).

### **The Sexual Politics of Looking: Robert Doisneau versus Helen Levitt**

There are some uncanny similarities between Doisneau’s *Sunday Morning in Arcueil* of 1945 and Levitt’s photograph, which like all of her pictures lacks a title. Both pictures have clearly been snapped in response to a quite similar occasion: a group of women have gathered on the streets to converse, and as they do so, their bodies form a closed circle denoting an autonomous social microcosm. The way they have unconsciously arranged themselves into a circle signals their female intimacy, the privacy and autonomy of the women’s world they have temporarily formed in the street. And in both pictures, the camera’s descriptive realism affords the viewer an opportunity to inspect, marvel at, and be amused by the women’s display of fashionable attire: dresses designed to emphasize the legs with a swirl of skirt, elaborately coiffed hair, and in the case of the New York picture, ostentatiously chic shoes—Levitt’s women all seem to have shopped at the same shoe store for their impeccably white high heels with ankle straps. (Indeed, the details of fashion are a clue that the pictures may date to the same historical moment, for Doisneau’s leftmost woman wears similar white strappy high heeled shoes. Apparently the New York women had more money to spend than their post World War II French counterparts. Only one of the French women had the funds to splurge on such impractical footwear.)

But the similarities between the two photographs—the sartorial details, the formal arrangement of bodies in space—are only half the story. The photographs are not exclusively about the women’s chic self-presentation; they are meditations on the gendered social drama of looking and being looked at. And therein lays the crux of the difference between them. Doisneau configures his photograph as a tableau of heterosexual desire imagined in term of normative looking relations. The pivot of his photographic drama is the instant when a young man turns to look at the women, who remain unaware they are being watched. His photograph inscribes looking as a male prerogative. In their unobservant stance, Doisneau’s women conform to what film critic Laura Mulvey famously called “their traditional exhibitionist role”: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-*

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<sup>413</sup> The components of the piece are reproduced in the Tate’s exhibition catalogue, *Street and Studio: An Urban History of Photography*, op. cit. p. 104-05. The catalogue editors explain the piece’s genesis, conception, and execution: “Laurie Anderson’s *Fully Automated Nikon (Object/Objection/Objectivity)* was taken in New York’s Lower East Side and comprises photographs of men and two texts. The men had made insinuating comments to Anderson while she was waling down Houston Street in New York. Anderson photographed them and later reported that they felt flattered by having their portrait taken, although the pictures were actually meant as a kind of defense against their unwelcome advances.” p.145.

*looked-at-ness.*”<sup>414</sup> But in Levitt’s photograph, that “traditional exhibitionist role” is infinitely complicated by the forcefulness with which the women themselves watch the streets and return the viewer’s gaze. Look carefully at how carefully they look; notice the quizzical and searching look of the woman who looks back at the photographer, and thus at us, the viewers. She seems to be sizing us up. And her companions are staring intently at something taking place beyond the frame—at some event, we infer, occurring on the city streets.

There is, to be sure, in Levitt’s photograph a male figure doing some looking of his own. In the background of the picture stands an older gent whose eyes are hard to read, shadowed by the brim of his fedora and placed out of the field of photographic focus. His look is ambiguous, elusive, perhaps sly. He seems to be admiring the women, and to a degree spying on them; his presence acknowledges the usual heterosexual script of looking. But at the same time, he is a diminutive figure; he melts into the background compared to the assertive looking women. His gaze is surely subordinate to their foreground presence and definitive stares.

I would argue that the central interest of Levitt’s photograph resides in the dynamic interplay of gazing and staring, peering and watching that she has triggered with her photographic encounter. The crucial difference between the Levitt and the Doisneau comes down to the issue of urban women’s own spectatorship. Levitt’s photograph is not about the conventional heterosexual script of looking relations, in which the man is the bearer of the look and the woman stands as the object of desire.<sup>415</sup> Instead, Levitt in this photograph, and many others, grants women an “active desire and a specularity of their own.”<sup>416</sup>

### **Levitt’s Feminist Scopophilia**

Indeed, I would go as far as to say that many of Levitt’s photographs encode the theme of female scopophilia. Now “scopophilia” is a troublesome term. It carries heavy theoretical baggage from feminist film theory that enlists psychoanalytic models to map the patriarchal unconscious of mainstream cinema. Yet the word seems to me to be necessary to explain Levitt’s peculiar fascination with the theme of female spectatorship.

My use of the term “scopophilia” once again refers back to Laura Mulvey’s classic essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In that essay, Mulvey analyzes the psychoanalytic structures that drive the looking conventions of narrative film. Her essay takes no notice of still photographs made in the city streets, so it cannot be neatly mapped onto the very different genre of street photography.<sup>417</sup> Nevertheless, I think that the terms she mobilized have relevance to

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<sup>414</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” reprinted in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, p.47-48.

<sup>415</sup> There is a vast and complex body of film theory related to the sexual politics of looking, but the indispensable, foundational texts include Laura Mulvey, op. cit. (originally Published in *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18) and E. Ann Kaplan, “Is the Gaze Male?,” reprinted in Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, ed. op. cit. p. 309-327.

<sup>416</sup> Gleber, op. cit. p.7

<sup>417</sup> Feminist film theory may have only a limited application to the street photography of Doisneau, Evans, and Levitt, since the differences between the narrative cinema and the street photograph are immense. The latter is not a narrative art but an art of fragmentary views, of episodes, anecdotes, and isolated scenes. Nor is street photography beholden to the imperatives of mass production in the same way as the cinema apparatus. So I do not want to set up any direct equations between film theory and Levitt’s still pictures. Instead, I want to appropriate scopophilia, a useful term drawn from Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality* and deployed in feminist film theory, to illuminate what I take to be the abiding obsessions of Levitt’s work

thinking about the history of street photography, for it seems to me that some of the basic principles she identifies in the patriarchal unconscious of the narrative film have subtended the mainstream history of the street photograph. Let me quote Mulvey at greater length, since she makes a strong case for a persistent and pervasive pattern of unevenly gendered looking within dominant visual culture:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

Much street photography has been shaped by a similar cultural orientation, both in the kinds of photographs produced and in the ways in which the histories have been written. I have already offered Doisneau as one clear instance; Walker Evans's "Girl in Fulton Street" is another relevant example, especially since it is a picture that Levitt likely knew (figure 4.9). Connected metonymically to the adjacent shop window, the "girl" becomes part of the commodity spectacle of the urban street as an object of consumerist desire. Certainly she "holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire," as she stands on display before the three men in hats and the male photographer's voyeuristic pleasure. The picture concerns itself with the power relations of looking, for the photographer's camera-facilitated gaze can be said to intrude into the girl's space, while she remains unaware that she is the object of a scrutinizing observation.

For the most part, this well-entrenched dynamic of gendered looking has been little analyzed in the standard histories of street photography currently available. Writers on the genre tend to uncritically rehearse the same pattern of active/male and passive/female that Mulvey identified as one of the calcified conventions of mainstream cinema. For example, Florian Ebner, in his essay "Urban Characters, Imaginary Cities," published in the Tate's recent *Street and Studio: An Urban History of Photography*, posits street photography as a phallogocentric endeavor, for he positions Jacques Henri Lartigue as an exemplar of the genre who used his camera to "...capture the bourgeois daughters of Paris, out on their leisurely strolls, and take them home with him as photographic trophies."<sup>418</sup> In Ebner's storyline, "The photographic apparatus was a precious instrument for the flâneur, with it, he could capture the fleeting encounter and give concrete form to the gaze of desire." In failing to ask what happens when the flâneur is a woman, Ebner's reading can only imagine "the gaze of desire" in the most restrictive way. The spectrum of possible formations of desire collapses into a narrow set of subject/object positions mapped onto a male/female divide. It was this narrowness of identification and pleasure that Mulvey's important essay set out to diagnose. Ebner's lack of critical attention to the role of gender in the history of street photography is mirrored in other accounts of the genre, too. To offer another example, consider that the tradition of street photography presented in *Bystander* follows the pattern that Wolff identified in the literature of modernity: it is predominantly a history of male photographers. Each chapter is organized around a canonical male photographer who is taken to

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<sup>418</sup> Florian Ebner, "Urban Characters, Imaginary Cities," in *Street and Studio: An Urban History of Photography*, (London: Tate Publishing 2008), p.187.

be the supreme exemplar of a key development in the history of the genre. A practitioner like Levitt becomes an exception to be fit into a normative male model. Moreover, the analysis consistently overlooks the dimension of gender as a factor in analyzing the significance of the pictures themselves.

I want to propose that Levitt's photographic archive is interesting and significant in part because it so wittily and subtly reverses, undoes, and remakes the tired structures of looking that have prevailed in the canonical histories of street photography. Levitt performed a proto-feminist intervention into the practice of street photography as a form of flânerie.

## Women at the Window

In fashioning herself into a photographic version of a flâneuse, she claimed for herself the prerogatives of a female scopophilia. Moreover, she elevated the idea of female scopophilia to the position of a recurring pictorial theme. Consider, for example, one of Levitt's persistent, crucial motifs, a central thread linking the early work and the later period: scenes of women—and often children, and in one case, a man and child—looking out from windows. Indeed, if you think back to chapter three, you will recall that Levitt's very first published picture in *Fortune* magazine depicted a woman leaning out of her window with her child peering shyly from her side. It is remarkable how often she revisited the idea. There is, for example, the picture that she privately referred to as "Two Wild Little Girls," and which appears as the fifth photograph in the 1965 edition of *A Way of Seeing* (figure 4.10). Playing with the old notion that the eyes are the "window of the soul," the picture is deeply about the urge to look, as it shows us a small child attempting to peer over the transom of the window frame. The photograph zeroes in on the sheer intensity with which these two children train their gaze on the world outside the window, their wide eyes indicating the effort of watching. Similarly, in the book *Crosstown* (p. 21) there is a photograph of a man and child who stand at the window, catching the air and regarding the spectacle of the street (fig. 4.11). Often, though, Levitt seemed particularly interested in women looking out from windows. She allowed me to study (and scan) two photographs from her archive that depict a household of women gathered at the window frame (fig. 4.12 and 4.13). The theme of the woman at the window was so important to Levitt that by the time she would come to publish her book, *Slide Show* in 2005, she would include multiple pictures of women or women-and-children looking out from windows (fig. 4.14, 4.15, and 4.16). Recalling Kozloff's point about the role of recurrence in the formation of a coherent photographic vision, I would say that Levitt's pictures are about looking as much as they are about touching, and that they betray a persistent fascination with the woman positioned as the one who is driven to look.

To be sure, the repeated representations of window-gazing can be read along social documentarian lines, suggesting to us the torpor of a summer spent trapped in the city, with the working-class household gathered to take air from the crowded tenement's single window. And the theme of the tenement resident (often a woman and children) at the window crops up in photographs by Shahn, by Evans, and by many a Photo League practitioner. It was in its own way yet another photographic cliché of working class life. (Bill Brandt used the device, too.)

But Levitt, I want to argue, expands the significance of the woman at the window. She makes the trope not only a reference to the everyday realities of working class life but also a self-reflexive meditation on the act of looking. She perceives the surprise, the subtle turning of the tables, that happens when women claim the pleasures of looking, and she elevates it to the status of a recurrent theme. Levitt's peculiar detournement of the sexual politics of looking

differentiates her vision of the woman at the window from the staple views of the subject that one generally encounters. Notice, as a comparison, the way in which Walker Evans centers his composition around the woman displayed in the window but leaves her own gaze undefined (figure 4.17). So does Shahn in his view of a woman and infant printed in his *Theatre Arts* layout (figure 1.14). Neither Evans nor Shahn dwells on the specific quality of the woman's gaze in the way that Levitt does.

Or, to take another example that may have inspired Levitt, consider Cartier-Bresson's famous photograph of two Mexican prostitutes peering out from their odd enclosure, which is something between a domicile and a prison cell (figure 4.18). Unlike Evans or Shahn, Cartier-Bresson incorporates into his photograph the confrontation with one woman's own look back. Her look, though, is subsumed within the context of an implied economic transaction. It is a look that connotes the idea of the "brazen" woman, evoking the polarity of madonna/whore by emphasizing the sexually available, illicit outsider. With the woman's body positioned as a commodity for sale, her look only consolidates her status as object rather than subject.

Levitt's fascination with the woman looking out the window proved quite different. For instance, in her picture of a woman musing at her windowsill (figure 4.16), we confront a look back that is startlingly complex, with the eyes slanted sideways, one eyebrow lifted, and the furrowed brow conflicting with the hint of a smile on her lips. Her look seems both bemused and skeptical. Though the woman is an object of regard, the photograph fixates on the complexity of the individual intelligence that animates *her* look. Foregrounding the issue of female spectatorship, Levitt repeatedly leads us to wonder what her women at the window are *thinking* as they look out into the streets.

Her recurrent fascination with the woman at the window is one way in which Levitt's photographs propose a distinctly feminist response to urban life. Another is her ongoing interest in picturing the streets as a repository of female sexual desire.

### **Levitt's Objects of Desire**

If one of the founding texts of modern urban culture is Baudelaire's *A Une Passante*, in which the male poet responds to the allure of a woman passing in the streets, Levitt's photographic archive neatly inverts the Baudelairean formula. She repeatedly envisioned the streets as a space of erotic encounter in which men are positioned as the desirable objects.

Consider, for example, the trio of African-American men who arrange themselves as a latter-day variant of the Three Graces (fig. 4.19). The cat in the street reinforces the feminizing touches of the male group, since felines and femininity are traditionally aligned. Or, to cite an even more emblematic instance of Levitt's feminist scopophilia, consider how in figure 4.20 she constructs a tableau of looking and being looked at that self-consciously revises the usual gender scripts. Here the young girl is positioned at the window, absorbed in the act of spectatorship, as a group of men pose for the camera. Surveying the arrangement of adult men in the street as if somehow commanding the scene, she mirrors the observational role of the photographer. Contrast the picture, if you will, with Walker Evans's surreptitious gaze at a woman (fig. 4.21). The difference between the two pictures extends to the amusing sartorial signs of the otherwise hidden sex—Evans points to her foliate rose, Levitt to his phallic cigarette. Levitt's sexually knowing sense of humor calls to mind Janet Wolff's notion of a "poem written from the perspective of *une passante* about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps."



But what I am calling her feminist scopophilia is not simply about using the camera to vicariously possess handsome men (though I have no doubt that was a motivating concern). Instead, it had to do with her sense of wonder about what sexuality looks like when women are imagined as the subjects of desire. Her take on visual pleasure involves a rather more complicated route than the “split” between active and passive that Mulvey identified—or at least it does in a tender-but-titillating photograph from page 106 of her book, *Here and There*, (fig. 4.22), a scene of bashful courtship that seems to transpose Romeo and Juliet to the graffiti-marred streets of Harlem. At first glance, this scene might seem to accord with Mulvey’s notion of the active male versus the passive female, for he has clearly come to call on her, and she is too shy, at this instant, to return his look directly. But as a *photograph*, the circuitry of looking and desiring exceeds that conventional gendered split, in that it positions this young African-American man at the very center of the frame in order to point to him as an ideal object of desire. He is desirable, the picture says, for his good looks and his gracious ways, for the restrained ardor with which he approaches the young woman. In a sense, the picture invites us to identify with the young woman, whom we understand will at any moment look up to return his gaze. She will see what we see: how the young man, radiant with desire, looks up at her in such a way that she is literally “on a pedestal” for him. His smile is clearly an invitation and a request, but he embodies the part of the “gentleman” with his folded hands and dapper clothing. The picture celebrates desire as a question of mutual regard through its intricate meeting of affect, body language, and gaze—as well as race, class, and gender. Levitt uses the snapshot form to compose a romantic ode to mutuality as the very substance of erotic allure. It would be almost corny if it were not so rare to see African-Americans accorded the status of protagonists in a drama of mutual regard. And is the young woman African-American, or an indeterminate racial mix? Her ambiguous racial identity and the presence of the Hispanic-looking man seated on the stoop reiterate Levitt’s persistent interest in ethnic heterogeneity.

Levitt’s photographs, I am saying, quietly challenge the norms of gender and sexuality that have tended to prevail in street photography. In at least one notable case—figure 4.23—Levitt’s scopophilic drive is so contrary to normative conceptions of sexual desire that it brings to mind Freud’s notion of the polymorphous perverse. The photographer’s voyeuristic gaze is trained on a menage a trois who share a complex exchange of caresses. With their ages and relationships so ambiguous, I think we can infer that Levitt was fascinated by the ways in which this eroticism does not follow the course of a “proper” object but spills over into an idiosyncratic blend of erotic curiosity and open-ended affection. Their tenderly groping limbs undo any concept of active/passive or subject/object.

It is, at the same time, more than a little problematic that she depended on the sight of racially different subjects to investigate alternative formations of desire. Does she, in a sense, relate to racially differentiated others in the way that male photographers have conventionally viewed women? There is no doubt that her work sets up a collision between the sexual and the racial politics of looking. Yet she does seem to avoid reducing her subjects to passive objects. Structuring her visual grammar around the language of the body, she portrays her subjects as active agents, and her gaze consistently looks beyond the facts of surface appearance to search out the fluttering manifestations of an inner world.

## Women's Worlds

Thus far, in working to anatomize Levitt's feminist sense of flânerie, I have emphasized the ways in which the themes of looking and desire enliven her photographic archive. Her work resists and refutes the received tradition of the streets as predominantly a space for male desire. Before closing, though, I want to widen my characterization of her feminism. It seems to me that, along with her interest in looking and desire, Levitt's photographs—especially the early photographs—are acutely concerned with the spaces of female sociability. She was in many ways a chronicler of women's worlds. That is to say, another facet of her feminist flânerie resides in her interest in representing working-class women *apart* from the scripts of heterosexual encounter.

There are many photographs that could be mobilized to illustrate this point. Indeed, I have already shown you one, for the picture that I compared to Doisneau's was very much about femininity as a carefully crafted masquerade—with all of that sartorial overkill—but also about the conviviality of working class women at home in their local neighborhood. What is especially interesting is that Levitt made a near repetition of the picture in an African-American neighborhood (fig. 4.24). Once again, through repetition she reinforces her commitments, in this case underscoring her interest in women's inter-relationships. On multiple occasions, Levitt photographed women gathered together to converse (fig. 4.25) to mind the children while doing the domestic chores (fig. 4.25 & 4.26), and to share the day's news (fig. 4.27). The everyday life of working-class women proved to be one of the persistent interests of her photographic flânerie.

To be sure, other photographers also took note of working class women's presence in the streets. A useful example is Photo Leaguer Walter Rosenblum's *Group in Front of Fence*, 1938 (figure 4.28). His women are arranged in front of a line of spotlessly clean laundry—the metonymic sign of their domestic labor—as figures of noble endurance. Levitt's women look equally fatigued by their endless chores, but they give off a much more garrulous quality, as the photographer seems above all interested in the liveliness of their interaction. Her women may be resting in the shade on a hot day, but they are far from passive.

Both Rosenblum and Levitt show us the ways in which these working-class women fashion a quasi-domestic space in the public space of the street. But Rosenblum's picture seems to present a discrete multigenerational household transposed to the street, showing grandmother, mother, and the younger daughters arranged in a contained unit. These are women defined by their reproductivity and domesticity. Levitt's photograph is more interested in the heterogeneity of the women, who seem to be neighbors rather than kin, and who give off the air of being opinionated, curious, and sharp-tongued. Once again, as we saw in chapter three, Levitt's sense of portraiture makes it impossible to read these people as mere types. Their physiognomies are too expressively distinct for that. Levitt's women are individuals, who seem to display a pronounced independence of will, in part perhaps because she gets closer to her subjects, making us more aware of their facial expressions and individuality.

What I am calling Levitt's feminism, then, is an important, even a definitive, feature of her “way of seeing,” to quote the title of her classic photo book. Levitt has been called “the supreme poet-photographer of the people and streets of New York,”<sup>419</sup> but I think that her interest was more specific than that—especially in the early years, when she was to an extent photographing for Janice Loeb, her patron. The pictures repeatedly speak to and for a feminist view of social experience. Levitt identified strongly as a feminist, declaring that she had been a

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<sup>419</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Improvised City: A Critic at Large,” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2001

feminist “since childhood,” and she spoke feelingly of the fact that her mother and grandmother were “both real feminists” before her.<sup>420</sup> Whether or not she consciously linked her feminist identity to her photographic practice, it seems to me that her pictorial archive repeatedly testifies to a working class woman’s point of view. This is evident in her attention to the everyday life of women. It is also present in her repeated obsession with liminal spaces. I have noted in previous chapters that Levitt, especially in her early years, tended to organize her photographs around liminal zones: the stoop, the window, the doorway, the curb. On one level, this can be read as a formal device, one that enabled her to transform the pro-filmic event into a peculiarly theatrical scene. But it can also be read as a recognition of the social position of women in the modern era: betwixt and between the public space of the street and the private world of the domestic interior. As a feminist street photographer, Levitt rejected the categories of the ingénue, sexpot, or matron; unusually among street photographers she lavished sympathetic attention on women whose reproductive years are behind them (fig. 4.1).

Levitt, to sum up, was among the first to map out the possibilities of a female form of flânerie. In a sense, even her extended attention to children fits into that mandate, for child-raising has traditionally been understood as the special purview of women. When Levitt photographs a little girl hoisting her baby brother onto her lap (figure 4.29), she is showing us the role of the ‘little mother,’ as girls were commonly called at the time.<sup>421</sup> Indeed, Levitt herself seems to have grown up as one of the “little mothers” of the working class urban streets; she recalled to me that when her younger brother, Bill “...was being born [in the home, not a hospital], they took me for a walk. I came home, and this character was screaming...I was his second mother. I looked after Bill from morning to night.”<sup>422</sup> If the streets were the spaces where urban working class children played, the windows were the women’s means to check up on the children.<sup>423</sup> Indeed, it is not quite correct to say that scenes of labor are entirely absent from her archive, for Levitt in fact revealed a persistent interest in the work traditionally designated as “women’s work”—the work of caring for others. It is the reason why so many of her pictures are, I think, about touching, just as Kozloff pointed out. The pictures are repeatedly about touching as an act of tendering concern.

In light of Levitt’s feminist eye, it can hardly be called a coincidence that she photographed men tending to babies on at least three occasions, for repetition is a form of

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<sup>420</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.27. 2007. Levitt told me that she had been required to enroll in a high school sewing class but refused to do the finicky work because “I would rather have been outside with the boys playing.” She said that she had wished to take the woodshop course instead: “I would much rather have been doing all that hammering that the boys were doing.” Author interview with Levitt, 12.8.2007.

<sup>421</sup> David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and At Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) devotes a fascinating chapter to “The Little Mothers.” He explains that in the years of his study—1900-1920, the years of Levitt’s earliest Brooklyn childhood—girls had less opportunity to roam the streets than boys did. “It was feared that the streets—with their excitement and adventure—could cause irreparable harm to young girls who, as adults, would have to content themselves with spending the greater portion of everyday inside their homes.” He also explains that access to free play was itself gendered: “The girls of the early twentieth century... watched as their brothers were sent out to play while they did their chores. Because the boys were basically useless at home...they were free to play in the afternoons. The girls were too useful to be given the same kind of freedom. Six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds were big enough to watch the babies and help their mothers with the lighter household tasks. Ten- and eleven-year-olds would be entrusted with enough responsibilities to fill the afternoon.” p.104-105. Assuming this pattern continued into the thirties, it may be one explanation as to why Levitt’s archive of children’s play seems to have more boy protagonists than girls.

<sup>422</sup> Author interview with Levitt, 11.2007.

<sup>423</sup> Nasaw, op. cit. explains that working-class tenement women communicated with the children through the window, p.38.

emphasis (fig. 4.29-4.32). Levitt seems to have delighted in the conjunction of tenderness and masculinity that these pictures present to view. Of the three, the photograph of the grandfather holding his droll grandchild may be the most conventional; the way the sitter proudly presents his infant to the camera makes it read almost like a studio portrait transposed to the street. But the other two photographs suggest a startling quality of intimacy revealed. There is an extraordinary physicality in the meeting of flesh and touch shared between the bare-chested man and the baby. Most astonishing is the photograph of two men marveling over a baby, which so moved James Agee that he called it “beyond speaking of.” (It was quite a feat to put Agee at a loss for words.) The picture reconfigures the nuclear family as a homosocial, interracial bond between men. There is a sense of utopian potential in those expansive smiles and in the alert turn of the baby’s head, which seems to respond to the men’s gazes. The scene is further animated by the playful graffiti on the wall. That palimpsest of infantile marks testifies to Levitt’s abiding interest in the expressivity of nonverbal communication, from her early discovery of children’s drawings to her continuing attention to the language of the body.

## In Conclusion

Helen Levitt has been widely celebrated as a major practitioner of the genre of street photography—indeed she received the honor of having her first one-person retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art when she was not yet thirty years old—but she has been oddly marginalized in the scholarly literature. Her pictures are widely admired, exhibited, collected, and reproduced, yet there is far too little substantive scholarship available to historicize, analyze, and interpret her oeuvre. Her place in the canon of important photographers may be relatively secure, but the exact nature of her achievement has yet to be fully theorized. In keeping with feminist art history's call to re-examine the contributions of women artists, I have set out to expand our knowledge of Levitt's life and work.

At the same time, I have deliberately chosen not to produce a comprehensive monograph that tracks Helen Levitt's life and work in equal depth and detail across the decades. Partly this is because Levitt's career did not unfold along a single linear trajectory of increasing mastery. Instead, I see her as having embarked on three discrete careers. First, she burst into a brilliant productivity in the late 1930s and early 1940s when she began to photograph urban children's graffiti art and sidewalk play. By the mid 1940s, she had transitioned from street photography to a second career in film. Only in the late 1950s did she return to street photography as her primary artistic practice, with an interest in exploring color photography.

Rather than accounting equally for all three aspects of Levitt's career, I have aimed to foreground the early work, in particular the breakthrough pictures of children's art and play. I have wanted to understand why the subject of children proved so significant for Levitt and her audience. What was it about the photographs of children in the streets that aroused so much interest in the early 1940s, and why do those pictures continue to stand out today as her singular achievement?

My approach to these questions starts from the premise that Levitt's decision to photograph children so often and avidly did not stem from any personal predilection for the subject. Instead, it needs to be understood as an outgrowth of a cultural discourse in which children acquired a new iconicity. The evidence I present is intended to establish the links between Levitt's attention to urban children and the surge of interest in children's art and play that appeared in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In chapters one and two, I worked to pinpoint the specific ways of thinking about and visualizing children that seem to have stimulated and shaped Levitt's approach to the subject. I connected Levitt's interest in the urban child to the trope of the Dead End kid that infiltrated many aspects of visual culture, to the Federal Art Project's concerted effort to promote children's art, and to the widespread interest in the street child in photographic sectors that range from the New York Film and Photo League to the popular culture of amateur photography.

By contextualizing Levitt's work in relation to other kinds of images of children, I have sought to illuminate the ways in which her pictures belong to a specific historical milieu. At the same time I have also been keen to differentiate her work from standard views of the child as an innocent in need of protection. In other words, I have attempted to think dialectically about my subject. I have tried to uncover Levitt's debt to the kinds of representations of children that circulated in the popular photo magazines, in theater and film, and in artistically—and politically—ambitious photography, while at the same time identifying the ways she managed to complicate and transform conventional ways of viewing the child. A key point of chapter two has been that Levitt's interest in children's performative play allowed her to represent the

everyday social space of the city as a theatrical realm. The idea of life as theater becomes a kind of overarching metaphor in her early pictures, and it makes the photographs read less like straightforward documents of reality and more like strange epiphanies.

By devoting sustained effort to comparing Levitt's work to other kinds of images of children (especially in chapter two), by analyzing the differences between variants of specific pictures, and by interpreting the work in formal terms, I have aimed to dispel the notion that Levitt's interest in the subject was a simple question of the intrinsic appeal of youth, of children being somehow naturally photogenic in their unself-conscious spontaneity. Instead, I have worked to demonstrate that Levitt's vision of urban childhood is so rich and compelling because it takes up and transforms many different ways of thinking about and viewing children, from the ethnographic document to the surrealist icon, from the reformist vision to an emerging ethos for picturing the exuberant vitality of children's play. A key point has been that the child was intensely productive for Levitt because it allowed her to work betwixt and between the categories of the photograph as a social document and the new quasi-surrealist street photography exemplified by the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Equally importantly, I have tried to remain alert to the ways in which pictures of children activate ideological assumptions about the nature and meaning of childhood. I have argued that Levitt's representations of children stood out in the early 1940s—and continue to reward close looking—because they undermine easy platitudes about children; they render their youthful protagonists into equivocal figures. It seems to me that, taken as a whole, her archive of the ludic child orchestrates a clash between the opposing mythologies of the child as a blithe innocent and the concept of the wild child as a savage who embodies aggression, violence, and the eruption of the id.

Photographs are difficult to write about, because they are so stubbornly silent and so weak in intentionality. But I have tried to find a way to make Levitt's work speak by setting it in relation to a very specific moment in photographic history. The existing scholarship on Levitt tends to identify her primarily as an inheritor of Henri Cartier-Bresson's innovative approach to making *images a la sauvette*, and that storyline tends to validate the work on aesthetic grounds by establishing a (patri)lineage of greatness, fitting her into a kind of relay race of canonicity. Instead, I have presented Levitt's vision of the ludic child as emerging from a complicated matrix of ideas, images, and cultural initiatives in which children acquired a heightened significance. That matrix involved the intersection of many kinds of photographic production, including the popular photography championed in the picture press, the socially aware photography practiced by the leftist camera workers at the League, and the surrealist innovations offered in the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. In situating Levitt's work in relation to this complex matrix, I have also sought to emphasize the heteronomy of Levitt's pictures (and of photography itself), showing how they lent themselves to a variety of uses and interpretations. Particularly in chapter three, which dissected the initial reception of the work, I worked to expose the subtle and sometimes contradictory ways in which the pictures seemed to point to, and yet to rise above, the politics of racial difference and class oppression.

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Having devoted three chapters to key aspects of Levitt's early work with children—her initial effort to document and thereby collect children's chalk drawings and graffiti messages; her turn from children's art to their active, performative play; and the kind of response that the work received in the press—I drew the study to a close by expanding the focus from the motif of the

child to the larger issue of the feminist sensibility that I discern as a continuous thread in Levitt's approach to street photography. That fourth and final chapter represents my effort to move my thinking beyond the subject of the child, and to look at the entire scope of Levitt's work with still photography. It is a first step toward a fuller consideration of Levitt's life and work in its entirety—a project that could potentially grow out of this more study.

What would such a larger project do, and how might it take shape? It would probably not offer a grand narrative of development, for Levitt's career involved stops and starts, bursts of activity punctuated by periods of withdrawal. It would have to proceed, I think, in discrete sections that correspond to her shifting interests.

A truly thorough and comprehensive study of her work would need, I think, to include an effort to sort and catalogue the visual material systematically, so that we might begin to identify the patterns of continuity and change as she proceeded to work from year to year. One of the limitations of my study is that I was unable to conduct such a systematic cataloguing of her archive. As I mentioned in the introduction, at the time when I was meeting regularly with Helen, she generously allowed me to examine the photographs kept in her personal archive, but she was thoroughly resistant to the idea of attempting to sort, group, and date the work. She preferred to keep her archive private and casually arranged. She also allowed me only brief glimpses of a few isolated contact sheets. Since she passed away in March of 2009, her estate has been in flux; the executors have moved the material into storage and declared it currently inaccessible to scholars such as myself. It remains unclear as of this writing when that will change.

The first order of business, then, would be to delve much more deeply into her complete archive so as to do a fine-grained study of her decisions about what to print, when to crop, and how to combine “the right material with “a proper shot.” Along with the imperative to plumb the depth of her now inaccessible archive, it would be possible to expand this study of Levitt's work into a book-length monograph by focusing on three points of inquiry: 1) figuring out how the photographs of adults relate to, and differ from, the celebrated pictures of children, 2) attempting to understand what was gained, and lost, by Levitt's decision to move into film, and 3) analyzing in more detail the ways in which Levitt's vision changed as she shifted from black and white to her third, color phase of street photography. In other words, I would need to give the same level of attention to the photographs of adults that has been lavished on the pictures of children, so that we could understand the full scope of Levitt's fascination with the physiognomies, actions, and bodies of the anonymous urbanites that navigate the space of the city. A comprehensive monograph would probably also devote an entire section of the study to the period when Levitt was immersed in film, working to expand on Jan Christopher Horak's and Juan Suarez's analyses of *In the Street*, to explore the production and reception of *The Quiet One*, to excavate Levitt's role in making films for governmental agencies and as an assistant for other filmmakers, and perhaps to think in particular about the ways the two major films were inspired by, but also distinctly different from, Levitt's archive of still pictures. Finally, this fuller monograph would delineate the patterns of continuity and change between Levitt's early street photographs and the work that she created after her return to the genre in 1959.

The main difficulty in undertaking such an expanded monograph is the fact that we no longer have Helen Levitt around to answer questions. The loss is enormous. I feel deeply fortunate to have been able to spend extended time with Helen between 2007 and 2009. But by the time I met her, she was well into her nineties, and her memory of the past had grown fragmented and dim. So I cannot claim to have unearthed mounds of new facts about her biography. Instead, I tried to

accomplish two main goals: first, to interpret her work carefully by relating it to a wider history of looking at children's art and play, and secondly to preserve a sense of her voice by weaving her memories and comments as much as possible into this dissertation's narrative. I wanted to give my reader a sense of her distinctive subjectivity as a working-class Jewish woman who, against mighty odds, found a way to engage ambitiously with the culture of her time.

If there still remain many questions to ask and answer about Levitt's work, that is partly because Levitt herself exhibited little interest in polishing her legacy for the future. She was a person who abhorred pretense and grandiosity, and she tended to insist that she had a "small talent." Nevertheless, this dissertation has been written with the conviction that her talent, and her contribution, was far greater than she liked to admit. I hope that future studies of Helen Levitt's life and work will help to limn the full scope and significance of that capacious talent.



## Illustrations

### Chapter One: Figures



Fig. 1.1: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1939 [as published in the 1991 exhibition catalogue]



Fig. 1.1b: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1939 [variant from Levitt's personal archive]



Fig. 1.2: Walker Evans, *Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936



Fig. 1.3: Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, 1938



Fig. 1.4: Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, 1939



Fig. 1.5: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 1.6: (left) Installation view, "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children," MOMA NY, 1943



Fig. 1.7: (right) Installation view, "Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children," MOMA NY, 1943





Fig. 1.8: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 1.9: Ben Shahn, Untitled (Lower East Side, New York City), 1932-35

YEAR AFTER YEAR— THE STORY UNFOLDS!



"My Argus Works Like a Charm with Children" says  
H. B. SUMMERS  
New Albany,  
Indiana



Like most photographers, Mr. Summers likes to take pictures of children, and the young lady above is his favorite model.

At 16 months, she is already a well-photographed mite, with a personal pictorial record that unfolds the story of her growth, year after year.

These are the pictures prized most by parents. They turn back the pages of the passing years to a series of priceless moments that are kept forever in Argus candid snapshots. Your dealer may not have all Argus models in stock, but you'll find those he has are top-notch values.

"STROLL IN THE GARDEN" one of Mr. Summers' splendid pictures that prove how attractive record pictures can be.

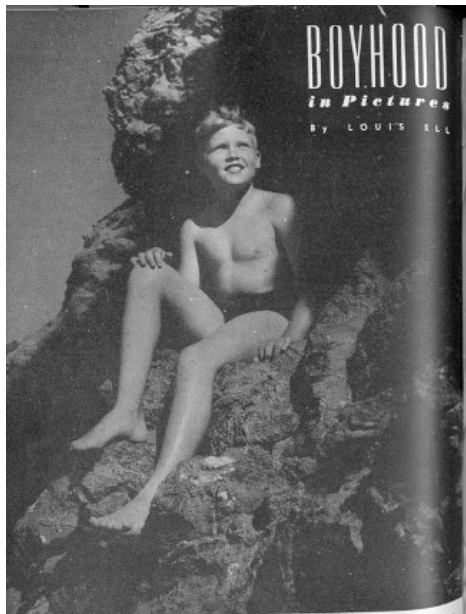
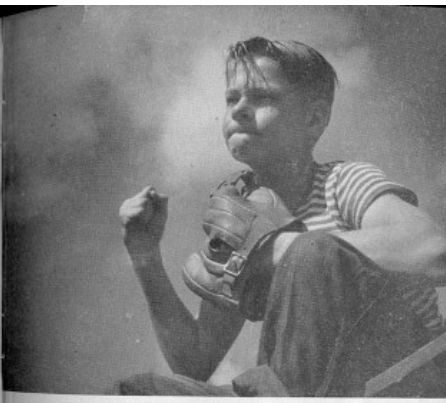
BUY WAR BONDS



Learn more about Argus—how to choose a film—and how to get the most out of your Argus. See the new Argus book "Good Pictures" at your dealer's.

Fig. 1.10: Advertisement for Argus Cameras, *Minicam 6*, March 1943

**BOYHOOD**  
in Pictures  
By LOUIS ELL

PHOTOGRAPHING boys is as exciting for them as the cameraman if they are pictured naturally and against the backgrounds they seek in play. The use of a G filter in this picture softens the sky sufficiently to harmonize with the rock and prevent the eye straying from the center of interest.

NO PROPS but a glove and a gavel. Checked list and a determined frown create a picture of summer Sunday afternoons at the ballpark and the tension of the ninth inning.

BOYS ARE at once the despair and the pride of those responsible for their being. Their activities are full of variety and color; their expressions are quick, varied, and appealing; and yet boys are not often photographed so the charm of youth is included, but more often are they caught stiff and camera-conscious.

Depicting boyhood offers a photographer a chance to produce pictures that have unusual appeal, but not any youngster will do for every type of picture. Scenes will be best suited to portray the mischievous side of boyhood. Some are obviously opposite type in a "sissy" role, unless you are deliberately seeking a comic or ludicrous effect.

to capture the personality that made you want to photograph him. Sometimes this will center around a happy, carefree smile, or a sad, appealing quality of the features, or an impish twinkle in the eye. When these are emphasized by the correct camera angle and the proper lighting, a boy's portrait becomes alive and worthwhile.

Once you have the boy in front of the lens, work fast. Don't make him hold a difficult pose or expression for long minutes at a time, while you fuss with setting the camera. Rather, let him stand resting in the appropriate spot he is to occupy, while you focus and arrange the composition.

After you photograph a boy a few times, and he becomes adept in giving you

Fig. 1.11: "Boyhood in Pictures by Louis Ell," *Minicam 6*, May 1943



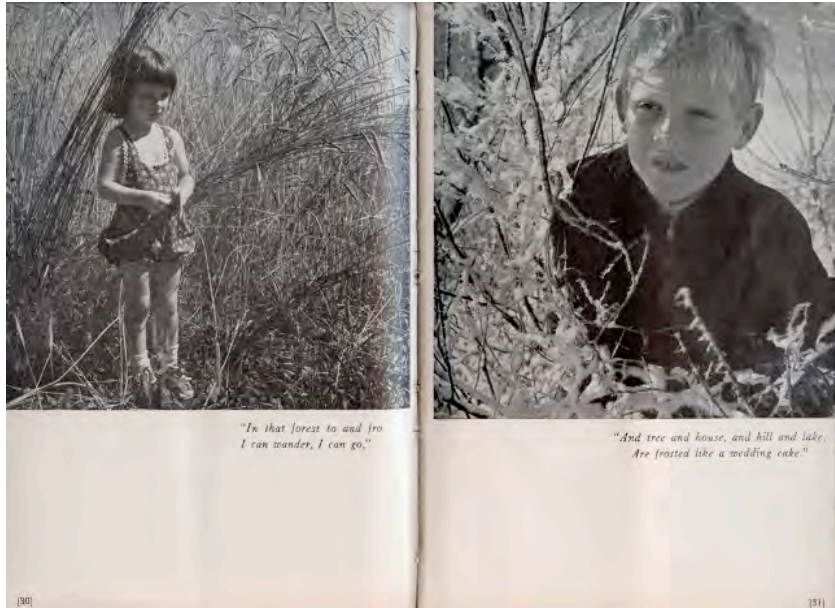


Fig. 1.12: "A Child's Garden of Verses by Toni Frissell," *Minicam* 8, February 1945



Fig. 1.13: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

## Scenes From The Living Theatre — Sidewalks of New York

Photographs by BEN SHAHN



Fig. 1.14: Ben Shahn, “Scenes from the Living Theatre—Sidewalks of New York,” *New Theatre* 1 (Nov. 1934)

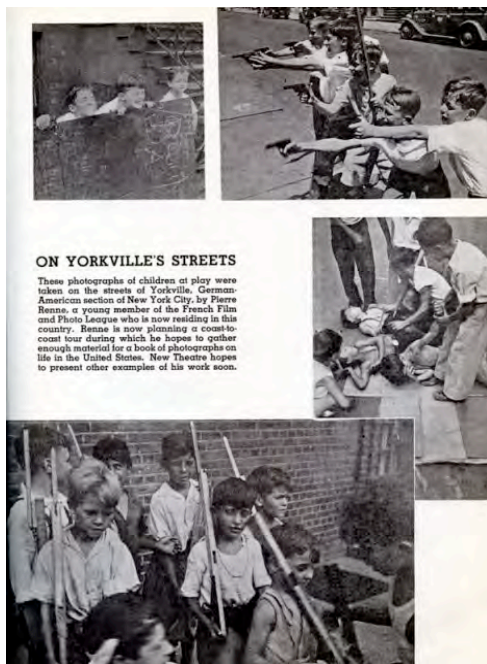


Fig. 1.15: “Pierre Renne” [Henri Cartier-Bresson], “On Yorkville’s Streets,” *New Theatre* (Sept. 1935)



Fig. 1.16: "Dead End Near Sutton Place," *The WPA Guide to New York City*, 1939, n.p.



Fig. 1.17: Unknown photographer (possibly Janice Loeb?), portrait of Helen Levitt, n.d. (perhaps ca. 1945?)





Fig. 1.18: Levitt, untitled (New York), 1936



Fig. 1.19: Levitt, untitled (New York), 1936



Fig. 1.20: Levitt, untitled (New York), 1936



Fig. 1.21: Levitt, untitled (New York), 1936 Fig. 1.22: Giorgio di Chirico, *Nostalgia of the Infinite*, 1912-1913



Fig. 1.23: Walker Evans, *Family*, 1933



Fig. 1.24: Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d. (1936?)



Fig. 1.25: Levitt, untitled (New York, Central Park), 1936



Fig. 1.26: Levitt, untitled (New York), 1936





Fig. 1.27: Levitt, untitled (New York), ca. 1937



Fig. 1.28: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1937



Fig. 1.29: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1937



Fig. 1.30: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1937



Fig. 1.31: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1937



Fig. 1.32: Levitt, untitled (New York), ca. 1937



## Chapter 2 Figures



Fig. 2.1 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 2.2 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 2.3 Helen Levitt, *Untitled* (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 2.4 Helen Levitt, *Untitled* (New York), 1972





Fig. 2.5: Weegee, *Summer, Lower East Side*, 1937



WHENEVER weather permits, Florence Ward likes to take pictures outdoors. Only natural lighting was used for this portrait.

"THE MIMICS." The natural play of these children in the city parks of New York has furnished endless subject matter.

Fig. 2.6: *Minicam* vol. 6 April 1943



Fig. 2.7 Sid Grossman, *Harlem*, 1938



Fig. 2.8 Aaron Siskind, untitled from *Harlem Document*, 1938



Fig. 2.9 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d. (circa 1938?)



Fig. 2.10 Walker Evans, Children Playing, 1930-34 (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1994.253.136.1)





Fig. 2.11 Walker Evans, *Boys Playing on Stoop*, 1933-34 (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1994.253.165.1)



Fig. 2.12 a-c Ben Shahn *Untitled* (Greenwich Village, New York City), 1932-35 (Fogg Art Museum P1970.3827, P1970.3836, and P.1970.3828)



Fig. 2.13 Jacob Riis, *Shooting Craps: The Game of the Street. Bootblacks and Newsboys*, ca. 1895 (SFMOMA, Sack Trust)



Fig. 2.14 Lewis Hine, *Newsies and Bootblacks shooting craps*, 1910 (George Eastman House 77:0178:0008)



Fig. 2.15 Clarence White, *Ringtoss*, 1911



Fig. 2.16 Aubrey Pollard, "Juvenile Aid Bureau Juvenile Delinquencies" 5.17.39 (National Archives 69-ANP-12-P3004-100)



Fig. 2.17 Aubrey Pollard, "Juvenile Unsafe Activities, Streets of New York," 5.30.38 (National Archives 69-ANP-12-3024-2)





Fig. 2.18 Aubrey Pollard, NA #2553-2 “Juvenile Aid Bureau Carpenter Shop, Trinity Church, 316 W. 88St” 10.21.37



BACKYARDS, LOWER EAST SIDE

Fig. 2.19 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins “Backyards, Lower East Side,” as printed in *The WPA/FAP Guide to New York City*, 1939



Fig. 2.20 *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, May 1942 (Vol. IX #4), 1942, Special Wartime Housing Issue



Fig. 2.21: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d. (1938?)





Fig. 2.22: Helen Levitt, *Untitled* (New York), 1938



Fig. 2.23: Helen Levitt, *Untitled* (New York), 1939



Fig. 2.24: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1939



Fig. 2.25: Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.26: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.27 Helen Levitt, Untitled, (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.28: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.

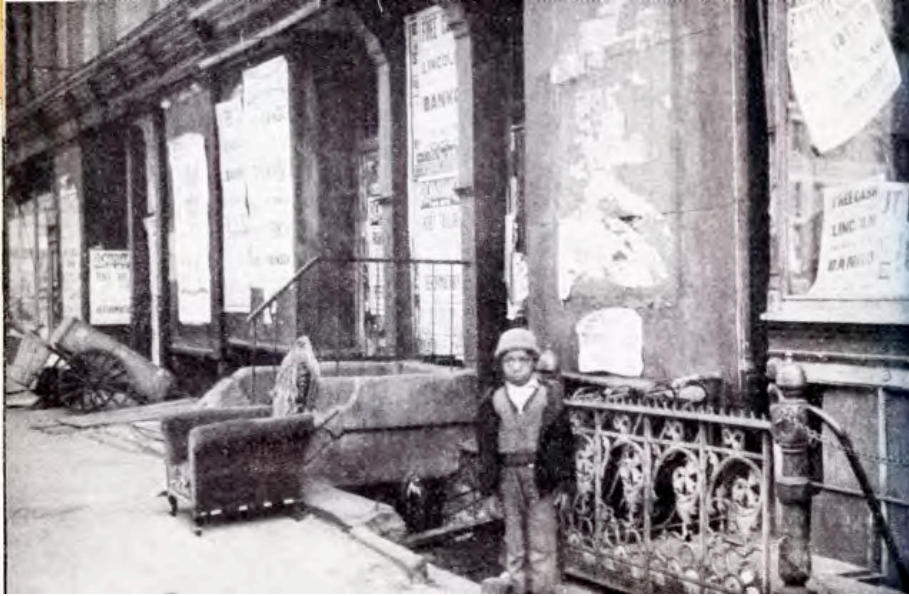


Fig. 2.29: "Slum Child," unknown photographer, n.d.



Fig. 2.30: Aubrey Pollard, "Children at Play in Slum Area," 1939





Fig. 2.31a & b: Levitt, untitled (New York), variants of fig. 2.23, 1939



Fig. 2.32 H.H. Lambert, photo captioned "Capturing the Flying Movement," printed in *Phototips on Children* p.10



Repeat of Fig. 26 for comparison



Fig. 2.33 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Seville, 1933*.



Fig. 2.34. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Valencia*, 1933.



Fig. 2.35: Levitt, untitled (Mexico City), 1941





Fig. 2.36: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 2.37a: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 2.37b: Levitt, untitled variant, 1938





Fig. 2.38: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York) [as printed in *A Way of Seeing*], 1938



Fig. 2.39a: Levitt, variant of 2.38, 1938



Fig. 2.39b: Levitt, variant of 2.38, 1938



Fig. 2.40: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, n.d.



Fig. 2.41 variant



Fig. 2.42 Helen Levitt, *untitled still from In the Street*, 1945-46



Fig. 2.43: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1939



Fig. 2.44: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.45: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.





Fig. 2.46: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, ca. 1942



Fig. 2.47: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, 1938



Fig. 2.48: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, ca. 1940



Fig. 2.49: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.50: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.51: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 2.52, Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.53: Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca 1942



Fig. 2.54: Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1944



Fig. 2.55: Helen Levitt, variant to figure 2.43, 1939



Fig. 2.56: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.57: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



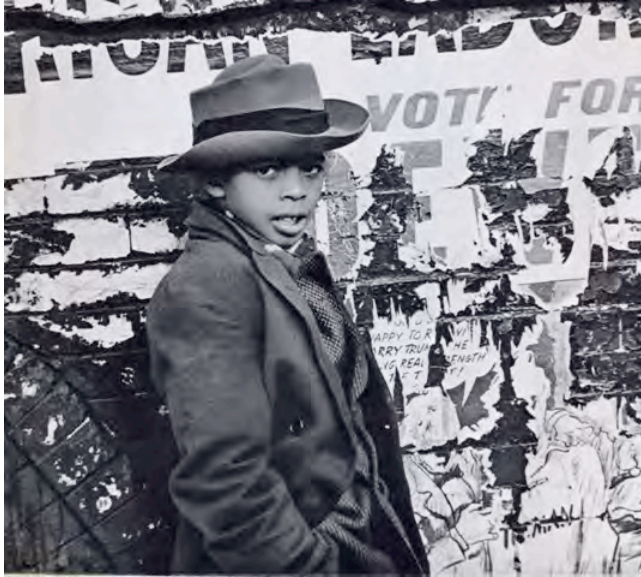


Fig. 2.58: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 2.59: Unknown photographer, Janice Loeb, n.d.



Chapter 3 Figures



Fig. 3.1 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York) [“Bronx housewife”] 1940 or earlier



Fig. 3.2a Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1939



Fig. 3.2b Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1939



Fig. 3.2c Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1939



Fig. 3.2d Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1939



Fig. 3.3 Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1940 or earlier



Fig. 3.4 Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1940 or earlier



Fig. 3.5 Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1942



Figure 3.6 Untitled (New York City), n.d. (ca 1940-42?)



Fig. 3.7 Fortune magazine, July 1939





Fig 3.8 Morris Engel, "PM's Gallery Presents New Yorkers—Unposed Portraits," *PM's Weekly*, July 21, 1940, p.38-39



Fig. 3.9 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1940 or earlier



Fig. 3.10 *Look* magazine, "The Story Behind Native Son," May 21, 1940, vol. 4 #11 p10

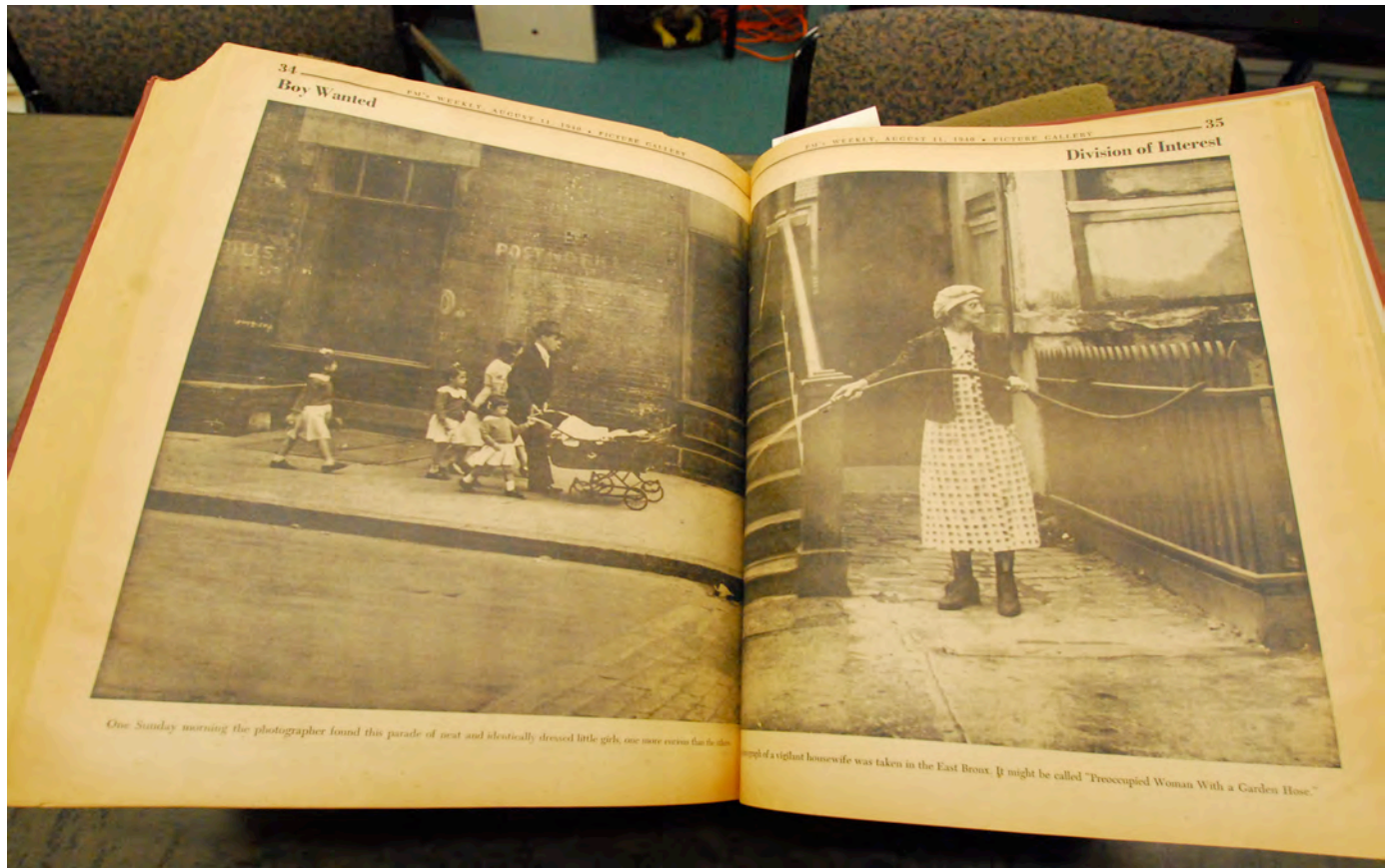


Fig. 3.11 *PM* August 11, 1940, p.34-35



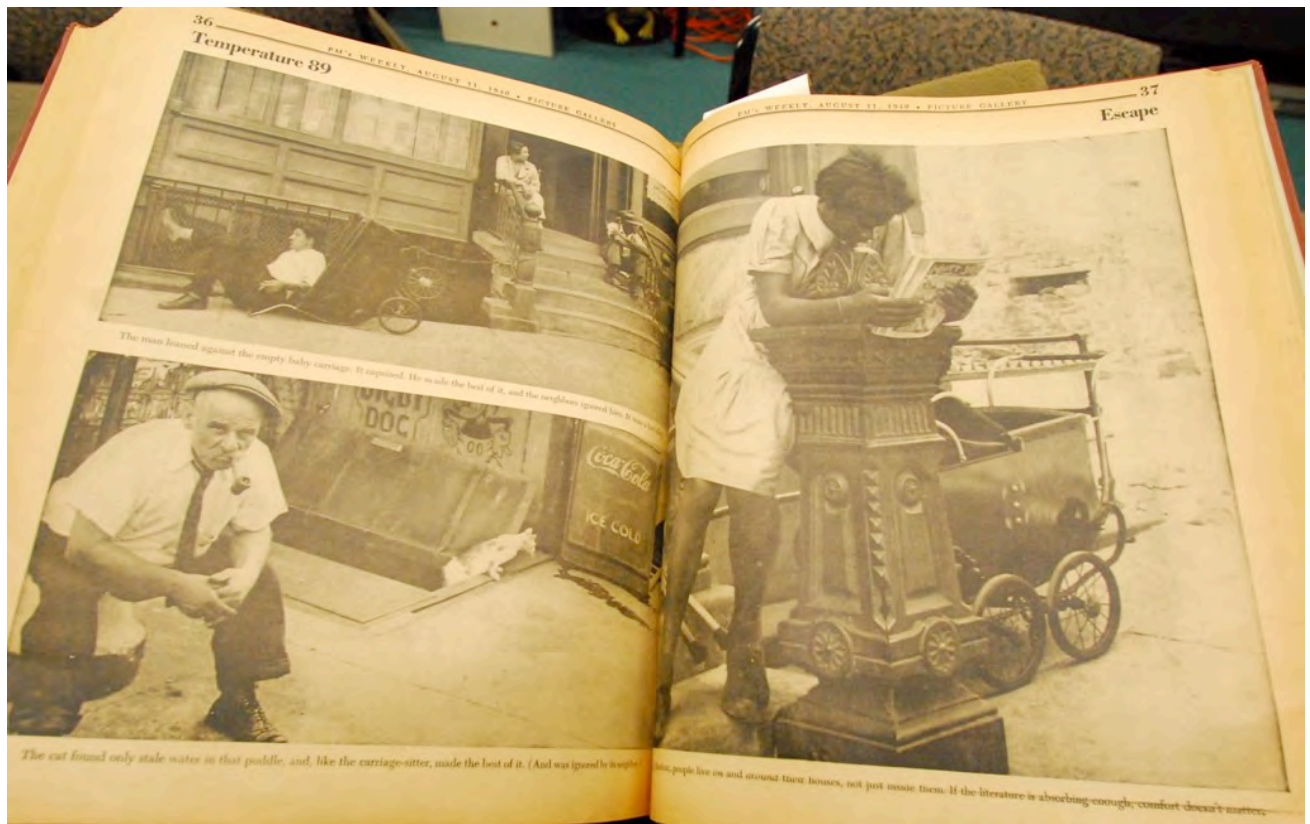


Fig. 3.12 *PM* August 11, 1940, p.36-37





Fig. 3.13 *PM* August 11, 1940, p.38-39



Fig. 3.14 Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, ca. 1940



Fig. 3.15 Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, ca. 1940



Fig. 3.16 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Calle Cuauhtemotzin, Mexico City*, 1934





Fig. 3.17 *PM's Weekly*, January 11, 1942, p. 44-45



Fig. 3.18 Installation view of "Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt," 1943.



Fig. 3.19 Levitt, untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 3.20 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), 1938



Fig. 3.21 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), [masks and bugle], 1938





Fig. 3.22 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 3.23 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 3.24 Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), ca. 1940



Fig. 3.25 Helen Levitt, untitled film still from *In the Street*, 1945-46





Fig. 3.26 Helen Levitt, untitled film still from *In the Street*, 1945-46

## Chapter Four Figures



Fig. 4.1: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, n.d.

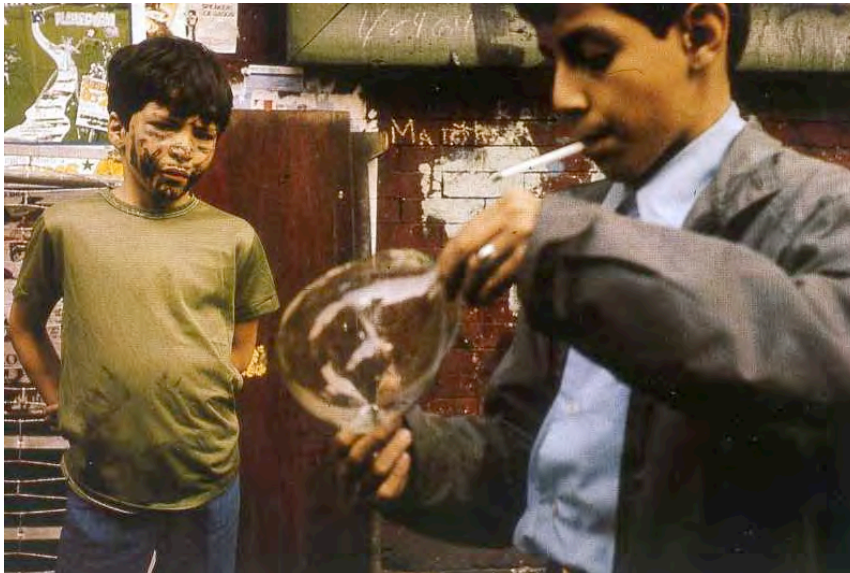


Fig. 4.2: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, n.d.



Fig. 4.3: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig.4. 4: Helen Levitt, Untitled (New York), n.d.





Fig. 4.5: Helen Levitt, *Untitled (New York)*, ca. 1945



Fig. 4.6: Ruth Orkin, *American Girl in Italy*, 1951



Fig. 4.7: Helen Levitt, *Untitled* (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.8: Robert Doisneau, *Sunday Morning in Arcueil*, 1945



Fig. 4.9: Walker Evans, *Girl in Fulton Street*, 1929



Fig. 4.10: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.





Fig. 4.11: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.12: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.





Fig. 4.13: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.14: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.15: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.16: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.

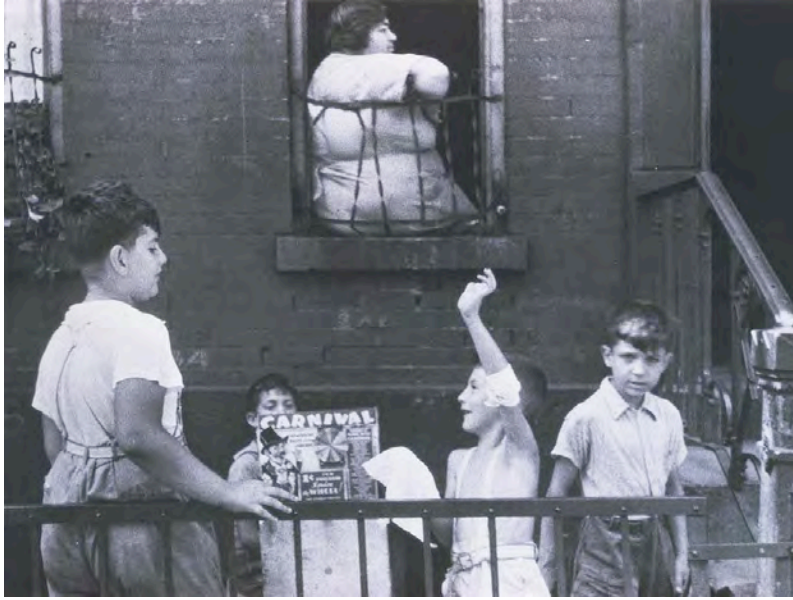


Fig. 4.17: Walker Evans, *Streetside Game*, New York City, 1938



Fig. 4.18: Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Prostitutes*, Calle Cuauhtemotzin, Mexico City, 1934





Fig. 4.19: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), ca. 1945



Fig. 4.20: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), ca. 1945



Fig.4. 21: Walker Evans, *New York*, ca. 1930

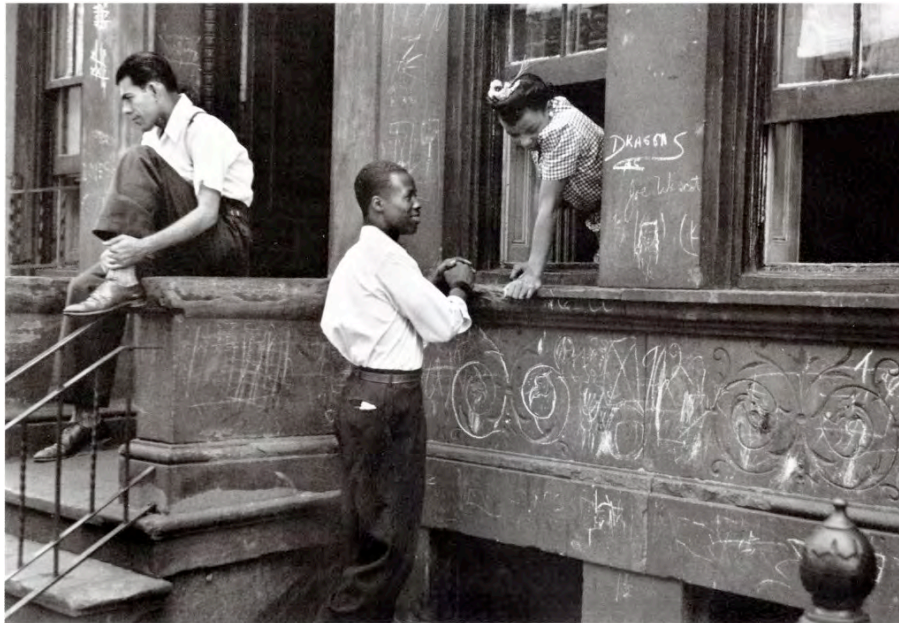


Fig 4.22: Helen Levitt, *untitled (New York)*, n.d.





Fig. 4.23: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.24: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), ca. 1942



Fig. 4.25: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.26: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.





Fig. 4.27: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig.4. 28: Walter Rosenblum, *Group in Front of Fence*, 1938



Fig. 4.29: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.30: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.31: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.



Fig. 4.32: Helen Levitt, untitled (New York), n.d.

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