Untitled, New York 1971 (from a color original)
Helen Levitt has been taking pictures since the late 1930s. Her work was first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and it was there that she was given her first one-person exhibition in 1943. Although her images have long been known to those who follow the photographic medium closely, they have only recently come to the attention of a wider public. Levitt's own needs for privacy and chosen detachment from the mainstream art world have tended to circumscribe her work in a quietly independent sphere.

This MATRIX exhibition represents two major cycles in Levitt's career: a small sampling of black-and-white prints from negatives made in the 1940s, and nine color prints from transparencies made in the 1970s. All of the pictures were taken in New York City, mainly Harlem, Greenwich Village and the Upper West Side. Levitt's interest as a photographer has been people; she selected these parts of the city when she first began photographing and has returned to them repeatedly—not because she was concerned with documenting the lives of the poor but simply because she found there children and adults whose social rituals, daily dramas and fantasies were accessible, vibrant and inexhaustibly complex.

Levitt's approach to photographing in these neighborhoods has changed little over the years. She uses a small and unobtrusive 35mm camera, and has learned how to become invisible, to blend in and watch quietly. Levitt works in a tradition largely defined by the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (b. 1908), whose prints exerted an early and profound influence on her own sensibility. During the 1930s Bresson mastered an awareness of the instant when elements of design, gesture and expression suddenly fuse into a photographic composition. Levitt uses this controlled yet spontaneous style in a distinctly original way. Whereas Bresson's images celebrate a visual and dramatic climax never to be repeated, those of Levitt suggest a continuum. They allow us into private moments which sustain themselves in spite of their intensity.

Helen Levitt's moments are not simple, though they may appear to be. They begin to reveal themselves slowly. Paradoxes often emerge for which we are unprepared. These streets can be colorful yet somber, lyrical yet severe, alive with the present and always bearing the weight of the past. In one picture, a little boy, whose painted mask also looks like ancient mask, stands before a billboard and a white road which literally travels back to "HISTORY."

Sometimes our initial response to a picture can unexpectedly turn back on itself and become something else. For example, there is a powerfully built woman in one of these photographs whose hot pink top and lemon yellow pants invite us closer, but when we get there, her face tightens. And in another, we watch a contemplative old woman sitting patiently with her dog, while an even older woman is helplessly vanishing in front of her.

There are also moments which seem to refute our most basic notions about the photographic medium. Although Levitt's pictures are clearly unposed, they can be so rich in humor and wonderful details that they appear to have been invented: fairytale icons of childhood—swans and a tiny dog—surround a sky-blue adolescent boy who is so perfectly content that even a dainty red sign saying "CANDY" shimmers above his head. Finally, in one of Levitt's most magical pictures, a little girl leans against a window which mirrors her dress's tropical fruit, while her paper cup mirrors both. Unaware of the beautiful picture she is making, she dreams while a sign behind her whispers "yooohoo."

Helen Levitt was born and lives in New York City. During the late 1930s she met the photographer Walker Evans and the writer James Agee, forming friendships with both that had a continuing influence on her own growth as an artist. In 1946 Agee wrote an essay for a sequence of her photographs; both were published in 1965 in the book A Way of Seeing. During the mid to late 1940s Levitt, the painter Janice Loeb and Agee filmed In The Street which Levitt edited in 1951; it is considered a milestone in independent filmmaking and is still widely shown. She continued film work during the 1950s, professionally editing and directing. In 1959 (renewed in 1960) and 1981 Levitt received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. She was awarded a New York State CAPS Fellowship in 1974 and a National Endowment for the Arts Photography Fellowship in 1976.

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Works in MATRIX:
New York, c. 1942, photograph, silver-gelatin print, 10 x 6 7/8".
New York, c. 1942, photograph, silver-gelatin print, 7 x 10 3/8".
New York, c. 1945, photograph, silver-gelatin print, 10 x 3 3/8" x 7".
New York, 1945, photograph, silver-gelatin print, 10 x 6 9/16".
New York, 1945, photograph, silver-gelatin print, 7 5/16 x 10 7/8".
New York, 1971, photograph, dye transfer color print, 9 x 13 3/4".
New York, 1971, photograph, dye transfer color print, 13 7/8 x 9 1/8".
New York, 1971, photograph, type C color print, 9 x 13 1/8".
New York, 1972, photograph, dye transfer color print, 9 x 13 7/8".
New York, 1972, photograph, dye transfer color print, 9 1/8" x 13 3/4".
New York, 1972, photograph, dye transfer color print, 9 1/8" x 14 1/8".
New York, 1972, photograph, type C color print, 9 x 13 1/4".
New York, 1972, photograph, dye transfer color print, 9 1/4" x 14 1/4".
New York, 1974, photograph, type C color print, 8 7/8" x 13 1/4".
New York, 1976, photograph, type C color print, 13 1/8" x 9".
New York, 1979, photograph, type C color print, 13 1/4" x 9".

All works in this exhibition have been loaned by the artist.
PLEASE NOTE: On Sunday, October 11, Marvin Hoshino, a close associate of Helen Levitt's and a teacher of photography at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, will discuss her work. This 3:00 p.m. MATRIX Afternoon Lecture will be followed by a screening of Levitt's film In The Street in the Museum Theater.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Museum of Modern Art, NY, Children: Photographs by Helen Levitt '43, Projects: Helen Levitt in Color (slide exhibition) '74; Photography Department Gallery, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY '75; Nexus Gallery, Atlanta '76; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC '80; Sidney Janus Gallery, NY '80; Grossmont College Gallery, El Cajon, CA, Helen Levitt: Color Photographs '80.

Selected group exhibitions:

Selected bibliography by Levitt:

Selected bibliography about Levitt:


Hellman, Roberta and Marvin Hoshino. Helen Levitt: Color Photographs (El Cajon, CA, Grossmont College Gallery '80, introduction).

"A Way of Seeing," Horizon (excerpts from the book), vol. 7, no. 3 (Summer '65).


Rubinfien, Leo. "Reviews," Artforum, vol. 15, no. 7 (March '77).


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