

HELEN LEVITT

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Opening	11 October 2018 6.30 pm
Duration	12 October 2018 – 27 January 2019
Venue	Tietze Galleries
Curator	Dr Walter Moser, ALBERTINA
Works	130
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Opening Hours	Daily 9 am – 6 pm Wednesdays & Fridays 9 am – 9 pm
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Helen Levitt

12 October 2018 – 27 January 2019

Helen Levitt (1913–2009, Brooklyn, New York City) numbers among the foremost exponents of street photography. The ALBERTINA Museum is featuring this American photographer in a retrospective that brings together around 130 of her iconic works. It was in the 1930s that this passionate observer and chronicler of New York street life first began taking pictures of the inhabitants of poorer neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and Harlem. And with her eye for the surreal and for ironic details, she was to spend many further decades immortalizing everyday people in dynamic compositions: children at play, passersby striking a pose, couples conversing. Levitt's unsentimental pictorial language gives rise to a humorous and theatrical pageant situated beyond any moral or social documentary clichés. Spanning more than six decades, her pictures, films, and books capture everyday life in the poor neighborhoods of her native New York City.

Chronicler of the city

The exhibition offers a survey of her main groups of works and shows her development from a street photographer to a documentary filmmaker and pioneer of color photography. After working for a commercial portrait photographer for a short time, Helen Levitt began to devote herself to photography in 1936. Inspired by meeting the Magnum photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, she began to capture residents of such neighborhoods as East Harlem and the Bronx with a 35-mm Leica camera, revolutionizing traditional reportage photography. Contrary to the usual intention of documenting social injustices for sociopolitical purposes, Levitt, with an eye for humorous details, depicted playing children and interacting adults in dynamic snapshots that rendered everyday scenes as a theatrical spectacle. Influenced by surrealism and silent film, the artist focused on her subjects' paradoxical and uncanny aspects as well as on their expressive body language.

Pioneer of color photography

The works at the ALBERTINA Museum range from her early, surrealism-influenced photographs of chalk drawings to her 1941 photos from Mexico and the clandestinely shot portraits of New York subway passengers that Walker Evans encouraged her to do in 1938.

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In 1948, she abandoned photography for filmmaking. Her trailblazing documentary *In the Street* (1948, in the exhibition) shows her pursuing the subjects she had dealt with in her photographic work. The Austrian Film Museum will be showing three of her movies on January 11. As early as 1959, she began working in color as a means of artistic expression, thus numbering among the earliest representatives of *New Color Photography*. She relied on color as an artistic means of expression, developing a new pictorial language in her pictures. And in 1974, Levitt became one of the first color photographer to be given an exhibition by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

The street as a stage

Graffiti drawings, adults sitting on stoops, and children rank among her central motifs. She presented the latter above all as theatrical spectacle by showing the young protagonists appropriating urban space in individual ways.

Her pictorial language, for example, diversely adopted political and artistic discourses of the time. Figures defamiliarized by masks or puzzling gestures thus bear the influence of surrealism. Human interactions, which she represented as a kind of exceptionally dynamic stage performance, highlight her interest in the performative, including the expressive actions and themes that were extensively explored in the cinema at the time. Lastly, Levitt's focus on then poor neighborhoods in New York can be understood as a critical response to a highly industrialized and profit-driven modernity, which was epitomized in the contemporaneous popular representations of clinical and technoid skyscrapers. Helen Levitt's pictures thus combine the everyday with the political, the theatrical with the authentic, and the humorous with the abysmal.

Donation to the Photographic Collection

Apart from 130 photographs, the exhibition at the ALBERTINA Museum presents more than 80 color slides, copies of the magazines *VVV* und *View* and Levitt's book *A Way of Seeing* (with James Agee, 1965). The exhibition was realized in close cooperation with the heirs of Helen Levitt, who presented a generous gift of 15 works to the photo collection of the ALBERTINA Museum. There are 32 works in the collection of the ALBERTINA, whose photographic collection has had a focus on Street Photography for a long time.

Wall Texts

Surrealism

Helen Levitt, by 1935 at the latest, came into touch with the surrealist movement spreading from France through Henri Cartier-Bresson's work. The French photographer's method of intuitively grasping incidentally encountered scenes and capturing them in gripping compositions had a lasting effect on her. Surrealism adopted the urban as its central subject. Sauntering down the streets seemingly without an aim, its followers discovered paradoxical, enigmatic and humorous elements in their everyday surroundings. Levitt frequently represented passersby in strange poses that lent their bodies an alienated appearance. She rendered children in Halloween costumes and masks as eerie actors of a magic ritual.

With the pictures taken by Brassai in the 1930s, graffiti had become part of the surrealists' arsenal of fantastic pictures. Levitt was also fascinated with the writing and drawings in the city's streets and on the walls of its buildings. Graffiti were regarded as an expression of the unconscious and as primitive art, which was presented in exhibitions in the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the time.

Levitt's photographs drew a lot of attention and were already published in surrealist magazines like *VVV* and *View* in the early 1940s. The Museum of Modern Art presented a solo exhibition of her pictures of children and chalk drawings in 1943.

The Street as Stage

During the worldwide economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, socially committed documentary photography established itself as an important movement. The photographers working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), such as Levitt's friend Walker Evans, recorded the appalling consequences of the Great Depression for the farmers in the US south. The New York Film und Photo League, a left-wing organization of artists that offered a progressive educational institution and a lively forum for debate for filmmakers and photographers, documented the poor population's everyday culture in the metropolis. Levitt was in close contact with the League and even seems to have been a member in the mid-1930s for a short period. Although the artist and the League shared their focus on the ethnic and cultural diversity of Harlem and the Bronx, Levitt's photographs are not concerned with revealing social injustices.

Like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Levitt saw photography as an artistic means of expression that allowed her to combine her experience of the everyday world with a genuinely aesthetic approach. She shows the street as a stage for children and adults defined by vital and eccentric gestures.

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This is why her subjects do not strike us as powerless and alienated from their surroundings but as protagonists who have successfully appropriated their urban space. The image Levitt's work offers contrasts typical representations of New York of the 1930s that portrayed the city as a highly industrialized, capitalized and modern metropolis submitting its inhabitants to its rules.

On New York's Subway

Riding the New York subway, Helen Levitt took pictures of its passengers with a candid camera in 1938. She carried it hidden under her coat, the shutter release cable in her bag. Levitt had been inspired by Walker Evans, who already worked this way and whom she had accompanied on some of his forays. It was also Evans from whom she borrowed the camera adapted for this purpose. The attraction of these candid-camera portraits lies in the way the subjects, feeling themselves unobserved, are oblivious to their surroundings and the high degree of chance involved in taking the pictures. When Levitt came to photograph on the subway again exactly forty years later, in 1978, she did without hiding her camera. Although she mostly chose a frontal view, she could now vary angle and image area far more freely.

Mexico

The photographs Helen Levitt made when she visited Mexico for several months in 1941 constitute her only body of pictures taken outside of New York. Movies, exhibitions, and books had made Mexico an attractive destination for artists such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and the film director Sergei Eisenstein, whom Levitt held in high regard. The photographer roamed especially the poor neighborhoods of Mexico City, documenting their inhabitants' miserable living conditions. Unlike her New York pictures, these photographs—untypically close to the traditional reportage genre—are clearly committed to a sociocritical purpose.

Children at Play

Playing children rank among Helen Levitt's major motifs. The subject was also in the focus of interest of scholarly studies at that time. The psychology of children was recognized and analyzed as an issue in its own right for the first time. While commercial photographers idealized children and social documentarists portrayed them as victims of political circumstances, Levitt's pictures strike a surrealist note. The surrealists read children's games as unconscious, irrational and subversive activities bringing to light also moments of violence—moments that Helen Levitt did not balk to capture.

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From the late 1930s, an increasing number of photographs showed scenes with fighting children who reenacted conflicts of the Second World War as spread by the media. These scenes served as parables of the political circumstances as did Levitt's photographs of often aggressive boys and girls threatening each other with toy weapons. Such photo galleries were featured in magazines such as *PM's Weekly*, which also published Levitt's pictures.

In Levitt's intellectual circles, children's games were not least considered a counterpoise against capitalism's increasing control of people's lifeworld. Her children show virtually no connection to the consumer society. Appropriating things that have been thrown away or are to be found in the streets such as hydrants for their wild interactive capers, the children indulge in the unmitigated experience of their creative and destructive acts.

In 1958, Levitt accepted a commission from Walter McQuade. She captured students in dynamic compositions she had already tested in her work for the architect's book *Schoolhouse*.

Gestures

The silent film decisively influenced Helen Levitt's way of representing dynamic bodies. The artist had been an enthusiastic moviegoer since her youth and closely followed the slapstick movies starring Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy. Yet it was Charlie Chaplin whom she admired most of all. These actors' form of expression was discussed extensively in artist circles of the 1930s and 1940s like the Film and Photo League. Whereas Chaplin and Keaton had still relied on exalted gestures, the sound film, which gained ultimate acceptance in the mid-1930s, entailed a change of acting. Gestures became more restrained and had to be subordinated to the spoken word. Regarded critically in various ways, this development again made the silent film an important point of reference for photographers and filmmakers who treasured its wider range of visual expression in its expressive corporeal representations.

The peculiar poses adopted by Levitt's silent film heroes and the emphasis on their extremities broke with traditional norms of the body. This is why the surrealists saw the slapstick genre as harboring a subversive potential, which they also recognized in the often strangely alienated bodies of Levitt's photographs.

In the Street

In 1945/46, Helen Levitt shot the documentary *In the Street* together with the filmmaker Janice Loeb and the writer James Agee. The first of several film projects Levitt realized is still closely related to her photographic work. *In the Street* shows everyday activities of people living in Spanish Harlem as if they were spectacles with surreal elements performed on a stage. The gags are based on slapstick-like patterns that Levitt had already tested in her photos. She captured some scenes like the one depicting children chasing each other with lime-filled socks with both a film and a photo camera.

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The form of *In the Street* is experimental. Levitt's editing does not follow a story. The scenes seem to be put together at random but are actually arranged with meticulous care. As Levitt filmed the people without intervening in order to capture their everyday lives directly, as it were, *In the Street* is considered an essential forerunner of the cinéma vérité emerging in the 1960s.

Way of Seeing

Helen Levitt's outstanding photo book *A Way of Seeing* was first published in 1965. Its conception had already been completed twenty years before, but the publishers delayed its appearance. The volume was the result of Levitt's close collaboration with the writer and film critic James Agee. Regarded as the initiator of the book project, Agee wrote an essay and played an important role regarding the arrangement of the illustrations, which correspond with each other both narratively and formally. Before *A Way of Seeing* saw new editions in 1981 and 1989, Levitt reconceived the book by changing image areas and the sequence of photographs and replacing certain pictures with others.

Color Photographs

Helen Levitt's involvement with color rang in her second creative period as a photographer in 1959. She was one of the pioneers of the genre at that time. After most of her early work in color had disappeared in a burglary, she returned to color photography in the early 1970s. Around 1960, she had visited the same places she had favored in the beginnings of her career. In the early 1970s, she shifted her activities to the Lower East Side and the Garment District. Color marked another approach to her motifs and added a decisive component to her work. Levitt used it as an independent compositional means; working with color contrasts permitted her to create new levels of meaning and spatial situations. Longer exposure times of the photographic material made her pictures in color less dynamic. The costliness of color prints prompted Levitt to work primarily with slide material. These pictures were presented in the Museum of Modern Art in New York as early as 1963 and 1974.