Helen Levitt

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Helen Levitt (1913–2009) became a photographer in the mid-1930s after meeting Henri Cartier-Bresson and seeing his radical new pictures made with a discreet, handheld camera. By the end of the decade, she had developed a unique sensibility, one informed by Surrealism and a love of avant-garde cinema but focused on the interactions of ordinary people in the streets, sidewalks, stoops, and vacant lots of her native city.

Grounded in gritty realism but brimming with subversive humor, mischief, and pathos, Levitt's pictures are open-ended and enigmatic, concealing as much as they reveal. Her uncanny photographs of urban children and their games brought Levitt early renown even as she remained attentive to the quiet gestures and movements of a broader swath of humanity observed with her 35mm Leica, especially in Spanish Harlem, where the activity of everyday life often spilled out of doors.

Following a monthslong foray in Mexico City, Levitt began to work in filmmaking, leading to a long hiatus in her photographic activity. In 1959, advances in the sensitivity color film spurred her to take to the streets again with her Leica. She continued to photograph in color throughout the 1970s, reverting to black-and-white film for a series of pictures taken in the New York City subway. Levitt continued to photograph intermittently until the early 1990s, when she became known as the "unofficial poet laureate" of New York and her oeuvre universally acknowledged as one of the most timeless and affecting in the history of the medium.

Early Work / Graffiti / Gypsies

Only a few examples survive from Levitt's first year using a Leica camera. Amid the backdrop of the Great Depression, her pictures of lone figures hunched over or lying on the ground appear documentary in their impulse, while other depictions of people in urban surroundings are notably more ambivalent in their view.

In 1937, while employed by the Federal Art Project to teach at a public school in East (Spanish) Harlem, Levitt noticed the many chalk drawings and messages illicitly scrawled by children on streets and buildings on her way to work, and began to document them in all their variety, innocence, and vulgarity. She sometimes also portrayed the artists themselves posing next to their ephemeral interventions.

Around 1938, on the advice of Walker Evans, Levitt began to use a right-angle viewfinder, a device that allowed her to face one direction while pointing her camera in another. This was particularly effective in recording the uninhibited interactions of the "gypsy" families prevalent in Spanish Harlem and Yorkville. Drawn to their way of life, she also borrowed Evans's 4 x 5-inch view camera and tripod to make portraits of "gypsy" children in their homes.

1938–1940 / Mexico City / A Way of Seeing

By 1940 Levitt had established her terrain, subject, and approach. In a rare statement, she later described her intent “to seize upon and record those apparently accidental disarrangements that nevertheless and in seeming contradiction provide a more intense apperception of reality.” Uninterested in portraying New York City as a bustling metropolis, Levitt instead saw it as an environment whose “size and varied character constantly forces into the open material for my camera.” The working class, immigrant neighborhoods she frequented—where adults chatted on stoops, mothers and children leaned out of windows, and children were left to their own devices—proved to be an especially fertile ground for her work.

In 1941, again inspired by Cartier-Bresson’s example, Levitt, a reluctant traveler, went to Mexico City with a friend to photograph there. Initially struggling with the challenge of working in new environment, she was eventually able to find her artistic footing, producing a body of work that at once acknowledged rawer social realities while locating a subtle lyricism unique to the city and its people. It would be her only trip abroad.

Upon her return to New York City, Levitt picked up where she left off, picking up on more sober themes of melancholy, alienation, and what she referred to as “the deep repressions of the unyoung.” After having

photographed for a decade, Levitt collaborated with her friend, the writer and critic James Agee, to edit and sequence a book of her New York photographs. Envisioning the project as an urban counterpart to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his 1941 collaboration with Walker Evans, Agee wrote an extensive essay to accompany Levitt's pictures that heralded their lyric qualities, the sum of which presented "unified view of the world, an uninsistent but irrefutable manifesto." After a series of setbacks, the book, eventually given the title *A Way of Seeing*, was not published until nearly two decades later in 1965.

In the Street

In the mid-1940s, along with her friend and patron, Janice Loeb, Levitt began to shoot footage around New York City with a home movie camera. They were joined by James Agee, who encouraged them to conceive of an experimental project that would serve as a cinematic extension of Levitt's still photographs. This led the three of them to collaborate on the pioneering short film that was first screened in 1949 and then released in 1952 under the title In the Street, a forerunner of the cinéma verité style. By the end of the 1940s and for the next two decades, filmmaking became Levitt's primary occupation.

Color / Subway / 1980s

In 1959, Levitt was granted a Guggenheim fellowship to experiment with “the latest techniques in color photography.” Her Leica loaded with color slide film, she walked some of the same streets she had frequented in the 30s and 40s, newly attentive to the chromatic character of her compositions. After the bulk of her slides were stolen by a burglar in 1970, Levitt redoubled her efforts, photographing throughout the decade with renewed zeal, developing an intuitive system of color that was at once transporting and transparent. In 1974, a continuous projection of forty of Levitt’s slides were featured at MoMA in New York, after which she began to realize select images as dye transfer prints.

Around the same time, Levitt also decided to revisit the subterranean theater of New York City subway as a site to make pictures, having served as a decoy for Walker Evans’s subway project work more than three decades earlier. With her subjects largely stationary in train cars and platforms, Levitt attended to the nuances of expression and gesture, recording quiet dramas amid unflattering light and cramped quarters.

From the 1980s onwards, Levitt continued to photograph, but only intermittently, working mainly in black and white, both in the city and outside it.