

The Museum of Modern Art

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HELEN LEVITT IN COLOR

Wall Label

September 16-October 20, 1974

Around 1940 Helen Levitt made a series of candid black and white photographs on New York streets. These pictures, quickly recognized as extraordinary, established a new documentary genre for American photography:

*Her photographs were not intended to tell a story or document a social thesis; she worked in poor neighborhoods because there were people there, and a street life that was richly sociable and visually interesting. Levitt's pictures report no unusual happenings; most of them show the games of children, the errands and conversations of the middle-aged, and the observant waiting of the old. What is remarkable about the photographs is that these immemorially routine acts of life, practiced everywhere and always, are revealed as being full of grace, drama, humor, pathos and surprise, and also that they are filled with the qualities of art, as though the street were a stage, and its people were all actors and actresses, mimes, orators, and dancers.**

In the years since, legions of serious New York photographers (not including Levitt) have paid this early work the homage of imitation.

In 1959 and 1960 Levitt revisited the same and similar neighborhoods to photograph them again, this time in color. Her object was to use color neither in a decorative nor in a purely formal way, but as a descriptive and expressive aspect of the subject, as inherent to it as gesture, shape, space, and texture. The introduction of this powerful new element obviously creates a new order of priorities in photographic selection. A lavender necktie may demand our attention more forcefully than the expression on the face above it, and the photographer must accept the new realities and work within them.

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.

John Szarkowski

* LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS
100 Pictures from the Collection of
The Museum of Modern Art