

Helen Levitt  
New York



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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK





Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009). *New York*. 1940. Gelatin silver print, 6 ½ × 8 ⅞" (16.6 × 22.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. DAVID H. MCALPIN FUND





FIG. 1. Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009). *New York*. 1940. Gelatin silver print, approx. 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm)



FIG. 2. Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009). *New York*. 1940. Gelatin silver print, approx. 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm)

**THE MASKS ARE FOR HALLOWEEN. SIMPLE MASKS LIKE THESE, STORE-BOUGHT** or homemade, were cheap and easy alternatives to elaborate costumes in the poor Hispanic, Italian, and African American neighborhoods of Harlem, New York, where Helen Levitt photographed almost exclusively during the mid-1930s and the early 1940s. There are other images by Levitt in which the costumed grotesquerie of Halloween is fully on display, or in which even the simpler masks take on the suggestion of sinister intent [FIGS. 1, 2]. But in this picture, which was most likely shot in Spanish (or East) Harlem in 1939 or 1940,<sup>1</sup> the poise of the boy at the front of the stoop intimates less the anticipation of a playful descent into the realms of the dead and the diabolic, or of a hunt for treats and the tomfoolery that will accompany it, than readiness for a society ball. The erect posture, the firm and steady turn of the head, the arm at ease on the imposing balustrade, the casually but confidently crossed leg, and the buttoned jacket propose the forms of monumental portraiture in miniature, though this preternatural maturity struggles against the demur of the shorts and the chubby calves, thigh, and dimpled right hand. The collapsed socks of the girl at the back likewise serve as claims of childhood, just as the bent right leg of the girl in the middle, and the slight tilt of her head, hint at idling indecision against the boy's more purposeful demeanor. At the same time, the way the two figures to the right mirror each other in their bodily attitudes and calm self-absorption sets them apart from the girl to the left: the hat at her feet, which she may have dropped in a hurry to put on her mask and join her two friends or siblings, signals a childish carelessness. The arrangement of the three figures reads as a tableau that pictures both childhood and, in the inadvertent mimicry of the boy, an adulthood just glimpsed but not yet experienced or understood.

In 1946, when Levitt and the writer James Agee were preparing a prospectus for a book of Levitt's photographs—the book that would be published as *A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New York* in 1965 [FIG. 3]—Agee compiled a provisional list of images, and in an annotation for the picture of the three masked



children he wrote, in bold, “3 babies” and “Emergent symbol.”<sup>2</sup> Agee was possibly recalling a wall text he had written three years earlier for *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*, the photographer’s first solo exhibition, at The Museum of Modern Art, in which he caught more fully the alignment of form and meaning in the image: “The three masked stages of infant emergence upon the world . . . are as perfectly distinct one from the other, as perfectly counterpointed in every part of each body into a coherent whole, as the best mutual improvisation of a jazz band, or the most studious choreography.”<sup>3</sup> The image is a song of innocence and approaching experience. It is precisely the foreboding of a distant yet strangely imminent adulthood that makes childhood so affectively present in this photograph. And it is Levitt’s ability to catch this paradoxical doubleness—through the perfect orchestration of evanescent configurations of pose, gesture, expression, and movement that form the grammar of her work—that makes this image, like so many of hers, gently unsettling as a visual experience and exceptionally diffident when approached as a communication.

Because Levitt is shooting from the sidewalk, the angle of her camera raises the children a little above the viewer and lends them a certain authority in their disregard for the adult passerby. The masks secure the children against legibility; as instruments of the self-possession and self-absorption of the two children to the right, they hold adult viewers at arm’s length, as if to remind them that the inner lives of children are not transparent to knowing grown-ups. At the time that Levitt took this picture, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and other psychologists were investigating the complex nature of children’s psychology, and the insights of these researchers were disseminated in the popular press and reflected in the arts.<sup>4</sup> But the masks in Levitt’s photograph are not childish equivalents of the face that the protagonist in T. S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) prepares “to meet the faces that [we] meet”; nor do they quite signal the forms of social communication Erving Goffman examined in his analysis of quotidian behavior as performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The Halloween masks are more exuberant declarations than weary disguises, more vehicles of a carnival liberation from the constraints and regulations that hem in children’s daily lives than signs of a successful mastery of social scripts and the codes that govern them. Except that in this photograph the masks have yet to be put to their festive uses. Only when the three children step off the stoop and into the street will they join the community of mischief and play. Until then, the masks seem to hold them in suspension.

Born in 1913 to Russian-Jewish parents, Levitt [FIG. 4] grew up in the Italian-Jewish neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Her immigrant father ran a successful wholesale knitwear business, and her American-born mother had been his bookkeeper before they got married. Helen had just turned sixteen when the stock market crashed, in the fall of 1929. Bored by high school, she



FIG. 3. Cover of *A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New York*, by Helen Levitt and James Agee (New York: Viking Press, 1965)





FIG. 4. Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975). Untitled (Helen Levitt on the subway, New York). 1938. 35mm negative. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, WALKER EVANS ARCHIVE

dropped out before her senior year and started working for a commercial portrait photographer in the Bronx. “I helped in darkroom printing and developing,” she later recalled. “My salary was six bucks a week.”<sup>5</sup> Soon she started taking pictures of her own. Children’s graffiti and chalk drawings on sidewalks were early obsessions. But New York City, along with the rest of the world, was in the throes of the Great Depression, and, like many photographers of the era, she was, in her own words, “affected by the time” and initially also tried “to photograph the working class, show ‘conditions.’”<sup>6</sup>

Levitt photographed during the months when the weather forced or invited people out onto their stoops to cool off or to gossip, and the kids into the streets to play (though the masked children in our photograph are jacketed against the chill of late October). For Levitt, as for all street photographers before and after her, the doings of men, women, and children in public spaces constituted a live performance. The theatrical metaphor is well worn but still serviceable in descriptions of street photography, and no other Levitt photograph proposes the analogy quite as compellingly and with as wide a semantic range as the picture of the three masked children on the steps. Alan Trachtenberg, a scholar of American culture and photography, notes “how much” in this picture “the doorway resembles a stage, the stone columns on each side carved as fluted pilasters suggesting a proscenium arch and the steps a platform, the staging area.”<sup>7</sup> The classical form of the pilasters and the way they rise up and out of the frame, along with the heavy coping of the balustrades, lend a certain faded grandeur to the tenement or brownstone facade that both elevates and contains the children. Pilasters and balustrades form a frame within a frame, even as the image opens up along the brick wall to the right. The cropping along the lower edge severs the space of the viewer from the stoop by cutting away the sidewalk, which could otherwise serve as a passage between them; the pier to the left functions as an added architectural interdiction. We seem in fact to be looking at the wings rather than the stage—or both wings *and* stage, preparation and performance, play as meta-play, the life backstage played out as play onstage. The child actors stand between backstage and stage, between domestic interior and outside world, between pause and moving out.

Levitt cropped, often radically, a number of her images in order to achieve a desired effect. The picture of the masked boy with a toy gun on the steps [SEE FIG. 2], for example, was heavily cropped to remove the distraction of other figures [FIG. 5]. And another picture of the children seen in our photograph was even more tightly reduced to create a claustrophobic focus on the two figures to the right [FIG. 6]; the effect here is a little ghoulish and a touch arch in its self-conscious Surrealist affinities.<sup>8</sup> So why in the image of all three children did she not cut away at least some of the space to the right, which appears, in contrast to the theatrical setting of the stoop, empty and of little visual interest?





FIG. 5. Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009). *New York*. c. 1940. 35mm negative



FIG. 6. Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009). *New York*. 1940. Gelatin silver print

Levitt did, in fact, crop the image, though subtly, and to the left rather than the right. In the iteration of the picture we have so far been considering, she cut away a small section of wall to the left so that the left pilaster forms the edge of the image. This is the print she first exhibited, at MoMA as part of the group show *Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics* in 1940, and the one the Museum purchased directly from her the same year; it was displayed at MoMA again in 1943, in *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*. In subsequent years, however, and in her signature publication *A Way of Seeing*, Levitt printed the fuller version [FIG. 7]. The difference between the two iterations is small, but it changes significantly the spatial dynamics of the image (there is a stronger sense of the stoop-stage as a separate, contained space in the fuller version), as well as the sense of whatever is passing between the three children.

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