Helen Levitt and Discourses of the Child, ca. 1935 - 1943

The photographer Graciela Iturbide once said: “the unconscious obsession we photographers have is that wherever we go we want to find the theme we carry inside ourselves.” Heeding Iturbide’s resonant words, I want to look closely at Helen Levitt’s abiding attention to children, their art, and their play during her formative years, from 1936 to 1943, in order to understand the theme she “carr[ied] inside” herself as she roamed the streets of New York, transforming urban life into art. In those crucial early years, she repeatedly represented children fabricating, from the barest threads of imagination, their own “strange weave of time and space.”

Levitt’s photographs uncover hidden worlds playing out on stoops and sidewalks. They are populated by numerous young people who roam the physical space of urban neighborhoods as they simultaneously navigate private byways of the mind. Just as the shop windows and alleyways of Paris seem to belong to Eugene Atget, the subject of children at play in the streets of New York is definitively Helen Levitt’s domain. (Helen has a replica of this Atget hanging in her living room.)

Levitt explored two distinct aspects of children’s play: their enactment of make-believe worlds, and their drawings and graffiti marking private fantasies across the city’s public spaces. She produced a substantial archive of the child mind in the form of more than 150 photographs investigating, documenting, and publicizing child art. As she was systematically exploring her interest in their art, she was simultaneously elevating their play to the status of recurrent leitmotif.

From these two ways of studying children, Levitt built a vision of childhood remarkable for the range of experience it divulges. Her photographs show children’s physical exuberance;

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their moments of repose; their expressions of rage, mockery, and love scrawled in chalk across city walls. Her visions oscillate between humor and pathos. She shows children’s behavior to be alternately tender and cruel; their pictures to be rude or delicate. Her young subjects combine vulnerability with vitality, even violence. They are figures charged with political significance who are nevertheless construed as separate from the political sphere. They merge the innocent and the demonic, the wild and the domestic. They are both ordinary and uncanny at the same time.

Consider, too, how thoroughly her individual photographs of children reward close looking. This well-known picture presents three children on a city stoop. Using a rudimentary prop—a piece of cloth with eyeholes cut out to make a mask—they are experimenting with alternate, transitory identities. One child is in the very midst of self-transformation, wrapping her face in the mask and peering tentatively through the eyeholes. The other two, her siblings or friends (kin or tribe), have already donned their masks. Like dancing courtiers, they stand poised in a moment of suspense, limb echoing limb. Their sense of formal equipoise imbues the photograph itself. It holds in tension a suggestion of timeless rituals, persistent in practices like Halloween, against the “time-seared”\(^2\) details of modernity’s contingent materiality, those surfaces that photography so readily represents as both revelation and record: rolled socks drooping at the ankles, dirt or shadow smudged on a knee, the tweedy texture and oversized buttons of children’s fashions circa 1939.

To my eye, this photograph counts in Levitt’s oeuvre as a visual manifesto. It insists upon the complexity, the fascination, and the seriousness of children’s play as a subject for contemplation. Note how solemnly the children stand. They are not cute—endearing, perhaps, certainly wonderful, but not cute. They are too grave and strange for that facile word. They

\(^2\) ibid.
would be vaguely threatening if they weren’t so small. Play is fun, yes, but deeply serious. Moreover, their play figures the street photographer’s practice: they, too, have affixed a special device to the eyes in order to re-frame vision, render it magical, and shift their viewing relation to the world.

Photographs like this one led to Helen Levitt’s prompt recognition by arbiters of art museums—notably the Museum of Modern Art—and editors of magazines. Clearly, her portrayal of childhood spoke powerfully to the interests, beliefs, and values of her era. By 1943 the photographs of children had launched her career. As you see from this 1943 installation view, Levitt’s debut exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art revolved entirely around the subject of children, from its title—“Photographs of Children by Helen Levitt”—to its press response.

How did Helen Levitt develop this strange, and strangely resonant, vision of child’s play? What made the young photographer perceive children with such extraordinary acuity, rendering such nuances of significance? How did the pictures speak to viewers at the time? These are questions I’ll endeavor to address in this hour.

On the screen you see a photograph of Levitt taken around the time she embarked on her work with children’s art and play. Helen tells me that she no longer recalls who took this portrait, or precisely when or where it was made. But there’s no doubt the dark haired young woman it records for history possesses a gaze of remarkable intensity. In a stroke of chance poetry, Helen’s eyes are directed sideways. She seems to be demonstrating the surreptitious, oblique line of vision she would employ when using her right-angle viewfinder.

Looking back to this early moment in her career, one finds pictures of children—and art by children—seemingly everywhere in American visual culture. Levitt was far from alone in discerning a new salience in the figure of the child. During the 1930s, a veritable child mania
burst forth in American culture, as a torrent of photographs, paintings, exhibitions, books, movies, and articles made children newly visible as objects of study, ideals of contemplation, and targets of political policy. Child mania cut across categories of media and style; it involved visual and verbal discourses. Children surfaced repeatedly, in multiple spheres of representation, from the late 1930s through the 40s.

In its visual manifestations, child mania involved at least two axes of representation: pictures of children and art by children. Significantly, these parallel Levitt’s two lines of work on the subject. Along both axes, the child functioned as a recurring, complex symbol, mobilized to embody contradictory claims, used to represent both ideals and fears. Images of children presented figures dense with symbolic significance, freighted with utopian as well as dystopian claims, overdetermined by ideology, and proliferating through both “high” and “low” arenas of visual culture. Dealing, as it did, in contradictions, child mania was marked by heterogeneity; it produced multiple new ways of looking at children.

For example, following the explosion of mass culture picture magazines that transformed visual culture in the mid-1930s, one stream of child discourse purveyed sentimental, commercial photographs of appealingly innocent, blissfully sheltered children. Framed as the rationale for purchasing products ranging from cameras to war bonds, photographs of children became one of advertising’s favored icons of consumer pleasure and domestic prosperity—in a

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3 The major milestone usually cited to mark this trend is LIFE Magazine’s 1936 launch date. A milestone study of photography in 1930s mass culture is *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, edited by Marianne Fulton and Estelle Jussim; Boston: Little, Brown (Published in association with the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House) 1988. It remains an important source. A more recent survey of photography in the 1930s, with sections devoted to the decade’s magazine culture, is John Raeburn’s *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*; Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

decade marked by catastrophic levels of unemployment and bankruptcy. The children’s skin
tones invariably conformed to codes of racialist hierarchy; their pastoral placement confirmed
the dominance of rural and middle class values.

At the other extreme, the child increasingly became an icon of vulnerability. The
outbreak of war in Europe flooded newspapers with images of child victims. Innocent casualties
were the corporeal sign of a new, and newly horrifying, kind of war. In the outcry over the
Spanish Civil War, for instance, the child served as a potent symbol⁵. Posters condemning Nazi
strafing of civilian villages reproduced photographs of children killed by air raids. The grievous
sight of dead children became one of the Spanish Civil War’s most volatile signs. Here you see
Pierre Daura’s 1937 etching, The Innocent Victims. In Picasso’s Guernica, unveiled at the
Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition, the tragedy of a child dead in its
mother’s arms is expressed through forms that evoke the powerful simplicity of children’s
drawings. Calling up the tradition of the pieta—in the left side, where the mother-child dyad are
menaced by the aggressive bull—Guernica suggests the slaying of sacred innocence itself.
Guernica traveled to New York, at Picasso’s request, where it was exhibited at the city’s
Museum of Modern Art in 1939 and would subsequently tour the United States.

Between these poles of commercial optimism and military threat, representations of
children became a privileged sign in some of the most important spheres of American art,
including photography. Especially notable were the new public art programs, such as the Works
Project Administration’s Federal Art Project, abbreviated the WPA/FAP. Its programs devoted
enormous amounts of attention and significant resources to making children symbol and
beneficiary of their efforts. The establishment of government funding for public art must be

⁵ Caroline Brothers provides a careful survey of magazine photographs depicting Spanish Civil War casualties
understood as a key factor shaping the expectations, conventions, production and reception of American visual culture in the mid to late 1930s. Sustained federal support for the arts was an unprecedented idea in American history, and these new programs transformed the nation’s cultural production.

The WPA/FAP elevated the child to a focal point of attention. Consider, for instance, that the 1936 exhibition *New Horizons in American Art*, held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art and intended to showcase the achievements of government patronage, included an entire section of “Children’s Work,” such as this fascinating satiric picture, “Politics Under the El” by 16 year old Mick Arsena of New York. When another exhibition of WPA art was held the same year in the nation’s capital, children’s art stole the show. Reporting on the exhibition, *The Washington Post* ran a headline declaring: “Children Best Their Elders in Federal Art Project Exhibit.” The reviewer, Sibilla Skidelsky, lamented the “extraordinary dullness” of the adult work but praised the “excellence,” “character,” “charming….fresh simplicity” of the children’s work. “The children’s section is the really outstanding part of the whole exhibit,” Skidelsky insisted.

If children were favored artists exhibiting works in America’s public art programs, they were also a favorite iconography of adult artists producing works in various media, from the murals installed in government buildings to the massive photographic archive undertaken by the Farm Security Administration’s distinguished roster of photographers. Turning briefly to public painting, you see here Philip Guston’s study for his now destroyed mural for the Queensbridge Housing Project, New York, lobby of the Community Center, 1940; Lucienne Bloch’s *The Cycle of a Woman’s Life*, from 1936 [also destroyed]; and Harry Sternberg’s Ambler, Pennsylvania post office mural, *Family—Industry and Agriculture* 1939. You can see from these three

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examples that public murals tended to use an idealizing rhetoric of simplified forms, and
simplified schemes, to promulgate fantasies of social stability based on the purportedly undying
values of family and land, work and play. The child’s capacity to connote notions of continuity
while figuring clichés of “the future” made it a frequent centerpiece of these propagandistic
works.

A similar sense of the child’s multivalent significance courses through the massive
archive of America produced by FSA photographers, such as these pictures by Russell Lee on
the left and Gordon Parks on the right, in which children’s urban play enlivens and domesticates
views of everyday life. Photography’s status as an indexical medium inflected photographs of
children differently than painted depictions in murals. Documentary photography was elevated to
a privileged role in 1930s visual culture. Its authority was understood to reside in its status as an
objective document, capable of embodying incontrovertible facts, but also—paradoxically—in
its power to transmit emotion with unparalleled immediacy. Children heightened the emotional
appeal, and they functioned as a key signifier for the severity of economic collapse.

Two exemplars of 30s documentary photography provide dramatic case studies. It is no
coincidence, I would argue, that children are visible in both Dorothea Lange’s 1936 Migrant
Mother, and the Fields Family portrait from Walker Evans and James Agee’s Let Us Now Praise

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Famous Men. The helpless child becomes a kind of symptomatic sign, a bodily index of the harrowing extent of socio-economic distress. Writers have long noted Lange’s evocation of the Madonna and Child, but she also alludes, I think, to *pieta* figures, such as Picasso’s *Guernica*:

the child lying limp looks as if it might be dying. Evans organizes his family around the central axis of the father and male child, whose gender in patriarchal kin structure would anoint him heir of the future. Here he stands disrobed, exposed, reduced to utterly basic bodily needs.

Fueling much child mania, then, was the radical reconstruction of American social and political reality in the face of extreme crisis. Political pressures precipitated tremendous changes in the norms, beliefs, and lived experiences of American childhood. The Depression’s duration and depth had “ignited” a widespread fear that America faced a “youth crisis,” as it was called in the 30s.\(^{10}\) The statistical picture was grim: historians reckon that 1 out of 5 children in New York City suffered from malnutrition.\(^{11}\) The intensity of suffering produced an emergent consensus that children deserved government-funded assistance. From the late 1930s through early 1940s, government programs began to intervene in children’s lives to a degree previously unprecedented. Roosevelt created a new National Youth Administration, instituted an Aid to Dependent Children Program, and in 1940 convened a “Conference on Children in a Democracy.”

Two sea changes in the social construction of American childhood date to the 1930s. The first occurred in 1938, when the Supreme Court outlawed child labor. It had taken activists decades of effort to accomplish this feat. The photographs of Lewis Hine played a crucial role in turning public opinion against the exploitation of child laborers in the nation’s factories, mines, and mills. It’s worth noting that a Lewis Hine retrospective appeared at New York’s Riverside

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\(^{10}\) Mintz, chapter 12, “Coming of Age in the Depression,” *Huck’s Raft*, op. cited.

\(^{11}\) *ibid.* p. 235
Museum in 1939. The passage of child labor laws secured the legal definition of childhood as a space apart from capitalist labor. They also had the consequence of making high school a newly universal requirement, which in turn led to the emergence of a new category of person: the teenager. Yet even as children were becoming sheltered from the burdens of labor, they were being swept into the cacophony of mass culture. The commercialization of childhood was the second great change ushered in by 30s child mania, from Walt Disney movies to marketing directed at children as a newly targeted “consumer group.” In sum, the 30s introduced a contradictory transformation of childhood: it was increasingly defined as a sheltered temporal space while being newly subject to commercial interests.

In her own turn to the child, Levitt’s early work engages, I contend, this new investment in childhood. My assertion rests not merely on the fact of the child being “in the air,” on people’s lips, in the public eye. Instead I aim to show that Levitt developed her attention to children through her involvement in two specific contexts: the grassroots, leftist photography organization, the New York Photo League; and the government funded New York branch of the Federal Art Project. Both drew child discourse firmly into their field of vision. Although each of these two organizations played only a passing role in Levitt’s development, they gave her an important set of parameters with which to begin. Nevertheless, what I think most important is how rapidly and thoroughly she transformed those given parameters.

**Portrait of the Child as a Young Artist: Helen Levitt and the Federal Art Project**

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13 Mintz, *op. cit.*

The seeds of Levitt idiosyncratic vision lie in the way she singled out children’s art for extended investigation. She initiated that theme during her involvement in the Federal Art Project’s concerted efforts to study, foster, and exhibit child art. Recall that the FAP had stimulated enormous popular and institutional interest in children’s art, which was visible in a slew of exhibits between 1936 and 1938 (and would remain popular into the 40s). By 1938, presentations of child art had become so ubiquitous that the editor of an American art magazine, *Art Digest*, felt compelled to complain about the trend. He titled his editorial of October 1938, “Spare the Child,” bemoaning what he called:

…the undue and mistaken emphasis being placed on child art…by museums (especially the Museum of Modern Art) and other public organizations whose walls should be dedicated to the artist who struggled for years to perfect his voice.

In referring to “public organizations,” Boswell was surely thinking of the Federal Art Project. Note that in 1936-37, Helen Levitt applied for and received a much coveted position as a photographer in the organization’s New York City division. She was among the lucky few who received funding to complete what was called a self-directed “Creative Assignment,” meaning she was given the opportunity to independently develop and produce her own photographic project under government patronage. Most other photographers supported by the FAP had the rather less exciting job of documenting events, activities and so on for publicity and record-keeping purposes. It’s worth asking: What enabled the young, relatively untested Levitt to garner a “Creative Assignment?” The project she proposed to her patrons was one sure to appeal to their interests: a photographic documentation of children’s art in the sidewalks and streets.

Other photographers working for the New York FAP also turned their lens to the production of child art. A prime example is Sol Horn, who photographed children immersed in
art-making. Comparing Horn’s pictures to Levitt’s elucidates how her early study of child art intersected with WPA aesthetics even as it flew off in its own wild direction.

Horn’s pictures establish a gentle, quiet tone. He emphasizes moments of absorption and strives to instill a sense of grace in his regard for the child. Connecting foreground and background elements in dynamic interplay, juxtaposing living figures with children’s naïve figurative renderings, Horn enlivens his photographs through thoughtful craftsmanship. But his limitations are clear: he does not question the habit of using photography to transmit informative scenes of objective reality, nor does he imagine that children’s art may involve more than its role in a system of progressive education. His child artists are all placed indoors, in the regulated space of an art studio, where they can be readily supervised by an adult’s instructing eye. The children themselves seem contained, docile, and untroubled.

How differently Levitt conceived child art, starting with the salient difference of space. Outdoors is where she finds her child artists, beyond the boundaries of institutional spaces, in the public thoroughfares of city streets. She shows pictures made with cheap, ephemeral chalk. The next rain will wash these wonders away. None of the pictures Levitt documents was ever intended to inhabit a frame or hang on a wall. Judging from the figures the children render—for almost all the drawings Levitt shows are figural—her children are too unruly and rambunctious to stand quietly at an easel. This girl, apparently the inventor of this bizarre coupling of a “square box” man and a hyperbolically coiffured woman, seems to contemplate dashing away. I would venture to guess that she never expected a dark haired young woman with a Leica to ask her to pose beside the monstrous figures projected from her imagination. She seems uneasy having her portrait taken beside her mural—for that’s what many of these drawings are, aren’t they? They add up to a kind of collective mural in an age when the mural, and visions of collectivity, were
foremost on the minds of American artists, who could not stop thinking about Diego Rivera’s great mural cycles. In working with children’s art and graffiti, Levitt achieves an astonishingly innovative alternative to the conventional mural form. Instead of treating the mural as a representational space in which to depict an ideal collective, she collaborates with real members of the working class—especially its most marginalized, politically disenfranchised members—to allow their collective voices and visions into the pictorial space of her photographic series, creating in effect a social mural that enacts collectivity and collaboration.

In studying children’s expressive mark-making, Levitt’s eye attuned itself to the properties of the magical, the comic, and the fantastic, but also the bodily, the rude, the taboo, the transgressive, and sometimes the unspeakable. Even the material with which the sidewalk drawings are made resonates with insolence and insouciance. Levitt recalls that the children used to get the chalk by swiping it from their school classrooms, behind the backs of their teachers.\footnote{Author’s interview with Helen Levitt, November, 2007.} Their preferred medium is thus nothing less than a stolen good. It is also, as I said, thoroughly transient. These drawings do not wish to win accolades or an education in rational, progressive principles. Levitt’s proposal to study children’s art must have piqued the interest of her patrons, but it is doubtful they anticipated an archive showing child art mocking ideals, reveling in sexuality, trumpeting rivalries and hatreds, and delving into forbidden zones. Levitt uncovers aspects of the child psyche that might go by the terms the vulgar, the id, or “the Imp of the Perverse,” as the poet Edgar Allen Poe memorably called it.\footnote{Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse” was first published in the 1845 July issue of *Graham's Lady's And Gentleman's Magazine*.} Her interpretation of the 30s delight in children’s naiveté is thus, in a sense, a tale of ironic inversion. If the child frequently functioned as the figure of a wished-for stability in public art of that anxious, unstable era,
Levitt’s visions stand in radical opposition. They declare childhood to be a dynamic state mingling affection and aggression.

Levitt’s radical handling of children’s art is not just a matter of what kind of material she selected from the ever shifting array of sights in the city streets. It is deeply a function of how she frames the children’s creations. All of the visual machinery that Sol Horn mobilizes to provide a sense of context, to inform and clarify—the easels, the model, the trappings of the traditional category of art, the complex arrangement of background and foreground, the focus in close on an individual child and the relating of the child to a legible context—all of this Levitt eliminates. She conducts a radical practice of negation, generally reducing the photographic field of vision so that the drawing looms large as an autonomous world. Sometimes Levitt steps back to show the child artist posed against her or his creation, but most often she focus closely on a single drawing. Since most of the drawings are figural, this gives them an uncanny animation.

Of course, without exception, each picture does retain at least one crucial, invariant sign of context: the tactile, unmistakable mark of urban space which is the hard, cracked, dark asphalt underfoot, or the other resistant materials of urban infrastructure—brick, iron, steel, concrete, brownstone. Yet the ground in Levitt’s work partadoxically becomes analogous to the cave walls of Lascaux in France, or Altamira in Spain. An exhibition titled “Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa” was held at New York’s Museum of Modern art in the spring of 1937.\(^{17}\) The MOMA show exhibited painted facsimiles of cave art then in the process of being studied by Leo Frobenius of the Forschunginstitut fur Kulturmorphologie. Levitt’s analogy of city street to cave wall foreshadows Jackson Pollock’s famous upending of mural painting from the vertical orientation of the wall to the horizontal field of the floor.

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\(^{17}\) Museum of Modern Art Archives, exhibition file #61.
It is easy to misread the deracination of these crude figures as merely a function of expediency. Ralph Steiner made that mistake in 1942, when he published six of Levitt’s chalk drawings in the magazine *PM’s Weekly* under the headline, “Sidewalk and Wall Drawings Show What Goes on In the Minds of New York Children.” He told his readers, mistakenly, that they involved little aesthetic skill. He was wrong. The seeming simplicity is, I think, a purposeful strategy of negation. By removing all or most elements that would indicate context, Levitt allows the viewer to seem to stand at the threshold of the child’s inner world, and peer within. The rude figures become animate, as if we viewers might participate in the infantile experience of subjective fantasy mingled with objective reality. The space between external and internal worlds comes alive. In sum, Levitt’s deliberate restrictions effect a magical estrangement of everyday reality, and her negations prove a productive practice. They bring the viewer within the ambit of the child’s mind.

Levitt’s sensitivity to the child’s inner reality links her work with D. W. Winnicott’s theories of child psychoanalysis. Winicott developed his study of the child mind by extending the object relations theories that Melanie Klein developed in the late 1930s—an important strand of the era’s manifold child discourse. Notably, Winnicott’s research included the practice of drawing with his child patients. He called this collaborative drawing process the “Squiggle Game.” He would make a squiggle or doodle, then turn the paper over to the child, who would improvise a drawing in response. Winnicott treated the resulting drawing as a diagnostic tool, a representation that made visible the child’s psychic conflicts and desires. In his view, making a squiggle drawing allowed the child to express feelings that are “incontinent” or “naughty.”

These terms apply, with remarkable precision, to the qualities Levitt perceived in the children’s

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drawings she documented on city walls. Her photographs of children’s drawings and play seem to anticipate Winnicott’s notion that the realms of play and illusion provide “a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.”

The qualities of child’s play that Winnicott defines in his study, *Playing and Reality*, overlap significantly with Levitt’s visual account. According to Winnicott, play involves states of absorption. It provides an experience of manipulating pieces of reality into a waking dream that expresses inner needs. It is the foundation of social and cultural experience. It is emphatically bodily. It provides satisfaction—in other words, it is fun. For Winnicott, the essence of play is conceived spatially: it occurs in the intermediate zone between self and other, between subjective and objective reality, between what we might call the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

**At Play in the City Streets: Helen Levitt and the New York Photo League**

Levitt’s Winnicott-like capacity to enter the child’s world, to dwell inside the dance of play, sets her pictures of children apart from those of her contemporaries, many of whom also turned their camera lens to child’s play. For once again, we find Levitt crystallizing her viewpoint in relation to, but differently from, an important organization—in this case, the Photo League of New York—which helped to catalyze her career. If the FAP attuned her to the fascinations of child art, in mixing with the Photo League Levitt received encouragement to investigate children’s play as a sign of a neighborhood’s social life. She drew some important habits of mind from the milieu of social realist photography organized around the League: the
notion of extended studies devoted to the cultural and geographic particulars of the city’s neighborhoods; a commitment to working class culture; and the interest in photography’s capacity to unfold a series of interrelated views.  

The Photo League was dedicated to fostering New York-based socially engaged photography. It offered classes, a darkroom, a publication called *Photo Notes*, and an ongoing, lively conversation about photography’s social role. At the League, Levitt learned how to enlarge, enjoyed access to darkroom facilities, and was exposed to important Russian avant-garde films. Although many details of Photo League history have been lost, in part because it was targeted, harassed, and ultimately destroyed by American anti-communist hysteria during the cold war, a substantial body of evidence shows that the organization nurtured a special interest in photographs of children. Some tantalizing fragments, such as the extant issues of the League’s publication, *Photo Notes*, tell us that in 1935 the League exhibited a photography show on the theme of “The City Child,” which was described “undoubtedly the most important photographic document the New York League has made. It will show the home, school and recreational background of the New York City child.”

What can be readily shown is that children appear frequently in League members’ photographs. Particularly good examples are the work by Aaron Siskind, on the left, done in his collaborative work on the Harlem Document, and by Sid Grossman, on the right. In photographs such as these child’s play makes picturesque the life of the street, calling to mind an earlier generation of American social realists, the Ashcan school of painters, notably John Sloan and George Luks. Drawing their subjects from New York streets, Sloan and Luks often made the

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working class child a special symbol of robust innocence and resistance. The child’s physical zest implies a promise of future social power; at the same time, scenes of play in the crowded streets make palpable the pressed conditions—literally and figuratively—under which such children lived. In its time, the Photo League was often called “the ‘Aschan school of photography,’” and Levitt’s Puerto Rican boys dancing in the street evoke Luks’s 1905 painting of an earlier generation of immigrant children, the German-Americans girls known as *The Spielers*, even if the works remain separated by fundamental differences of medium and period.

By Levitt’s time, an interest in picturesque scenes of street play involved more than visual pleasure; it intersected with state efforts to turn a regulating eye on children’s leisure time activities. As children were prohibited from work by new statutes, their play became subject to a form of child discourse that sought to define social norms about proper or improper play—witness the binary opposition presented in this photographic juxtaposition from the 1942 *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*. It prescribes normative values that would situate children safely within the walls of regulated institutional spaces. It aims to eradicate the unruly working class world of play celebrated in Levitt’s pictures and to replace it with a homogenizing, controlling modernity. Around the very time Levitt was photographing child art for the FAP, photographer Aubrey Pollard received a commission to investigate so-called “Juvenile Delinquencies”. Created for the government’s Juvenile Aid Bureau, his photographs attend to urban children’s energetic appropriation of city life, but only to document what the verso captions call “Unsafe Activities, Streets of New York.”

Levitt rejects the normalizing drive of documentary evidence addressed to the public. She prefers to dramatize the oppositions under debate in child discourse: innocence versus experience; the wild versus the domestic; the free versus the controlled; the oppressions of class

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21 Bezner, *op. cit.*
versus the liveliness of working class culture; ethnic heterogeneity versus some shared concept of “American-ness.” Most of all, I think, she aims to preserve, understand, and illuminate the child’s inner experience of play. That she succeeds so well hinges on the spatial syntax of her photographs. To explain what I mean, let me compare a quintessential Levitt representation of child’s play with a photograph Aubrey Pollard made in 1939 for the New York WPA/FAP.

Pollard (right) and Levitt (left) share many reference points. Both draw attention to the children who grow up impoverished in a racist society. Each points out the resourcefulness with which these children fashion a full-fledged imaginary world from the scraps or marginal spaces of the city. Pollard is intrigued by the boy who has transformed a broken umbrella into a saber or guitar; Levitt pays homage to her boys’ boisterous appropriation of an abandoned building, its shuttered doors re-imagined as a theatrical platform or a boxing arena. Showing groups of boys acting out the rough and tumble roles of warriors, the two photographs imply that players perform cultural gender rituals.

Yet when it comes to space—and the way that space provides the syntax of a photograph—Pollard has little in common with Levitt. To state the basic but crucial point: Pollard keeps himself at a distance. The children’s individual facial expressions remain vague in his picture. Levitt, in contrast, has achieved an extraordinary specificity in showing the boy peering around the column, looking back at the viewer with his complex mixture of curiosity and shyness. But her achievement involves much more than clarity of detail.

Whereas Pollard conceives his subject as something separate, located “over there,” not “here,” Levitt seems to place us in the midst of the action, the space, and the fantasy. Partly she does this by seeking out the boldest, most kinetic of gestures, showing children interacting at the moment their muscles are tense, nerves awake, and breath sped up. But there is more to it than
her nimble-fingered precision, that cliché of the “decisive moment.” In many of her greatest photographs—such as this one—Levitt does something unusual: she encodes a profound sense of liminality into the picture space.

In her early years, Levitt discovered magical transformations taking place in liminal spaces. The quintessential Levitt picture centers on hallowed ground of urban space: the stoop, the doorway, the window, the vacant lot or the curb—transitional realms. For instance, the fame of this photograph of boys playing with a broken mirror rests, I think, on the many ideas about liminality it fuses together into multiple layers, until becomes a meta-discourse on the nature of the liminal. The mirror has shattered. Its smooth glass surface lies in shards in the curb. Where it normally would hold, point by point, a closed loop of the real and the reflected, a portal has opened. What was merely an image is now a doorway. So long as the players maintain their circle apart from the parade of people consigned to ordinary existence, it will permit passage from one realm to another.

I would go so far as to say that in certain extraordinary pictures, Levitt does not simply point out the spaces of liminality. She manages to cast a kind of magic spell by granting the picture itself an intrinsic sense of liminal experience—as in this photograph, which Levitt has called *Two Wild Little Girls*. Levitt aligns the photographic border so intimately with the liminal object—the window frame—that she knits them together the way the fingers of two hands might snugly clasp. She takes photography’s uncanny power to describe an object, such that it provides seemingly transparent access to the real—the girls’ curly hair, the floral curtain print, the window frame’s wood grain—and combines it with a figuration of mystery or blindness: the rich black depth of the window space, an irrational occlusion in the photograph’s rational objectivity. That dense dark space inscribes liminality into the picture itself, for it produces an absence that is
also a presence. It is a void richly full. Recall the basic fact that photographs appear blackest where the constituent chemicals have received the greatest amount of light. The palpable depth of the darkness becomes analogous to the expressive depth visible in the girls’ eyes. As the old saying goes, the eyes are “the windows of the soul,” and the picture’s play between seeing eyes and unseeing aperture suggests eyes are the very organ of limanility. They effect the passageway between the light of the external world and the depth of inner mind, that camera obscura within the skull.

I am arguing, then, that in important photographs Levitt does not merely depict play. She gets the photograph itself to play, through her attunement to the power of liminality. Moreover, her investigations of liminality as a structuring principle anticipate ideas elaborated by the influential theorist, Victor Turner. Levitt and Turner share the conviction that the secrets of human culture and psyche play out in liminal experiences. Significantly, both Levitt and Turner developed their respective accounts of liminality—hers visual, his verbal—through close study of the phenomena of play.

Writing from an anthropologist’s perspective on play and the performative genres of culture, Victor Turner devised an analytic model based on a grammatical opposition: the subjunctive versus the indicative mood.²² It seems to me that Turner’s opposition helps to illuminate the ways that Levitt altered the terms of the 1930s photographic paradigm. The classical documentary mode of the 1930s aligns with Turner’s notion of the “indicative mood.” For an indicative verb, as Turner explains, is one that expresses objective fact. It says, “This is…” The realist clarity of Walker Evans’s “documentary style” speaks to its audience in the

²² Victor Turner, “Liminality and the Performative Genres,” Studies in Symbolism and Cultural Communication, edited by F. Allan Hanson (Lawrence, Kansa: University of Kansas Publications in Anthropology, 1982). “For language has something to say about deeply founded human regularities—particularly grammar. After all, we are linked and separated most significantly by coded sounds and the rules of their arrangement.”
indicative mood. It tells us that “an act, state, or occurrence” is “actual.”

It declares, “This is how sharecroppers live. Here is the reality they inhabit.” Or, to select a subject matter closer to Levitt’s, it says, “When city children play, they read comics; they gather in groups; they make themselves at home on the sidewalk.” The subjunctive mood of a verb operates quite differently. It is used, explains Turner, to “express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility...rather than to state an actual fact.” The example he gives is the verb “were” in the phrase, “if I were you.”

Levitt, like Turner, links liminal states of experience to the subjunctive mood of verbs. This picture of boys at play on the precariously narrow lintel over a doorway acquires its power, I think, from Levitt’s ability to make her photograph speak in the subjunctive mood. By dissolving the spatial distance between viewer and viewed, by drawing the classically ornamented, column-flanked portal toward the viewer, she activates a host of possible “as if” statements. The children arrange themselves as if they were sculpted warriors in a classical marble frieze. They are driven to one end of the lintel as if it were the plank of a pirate ship, and the captive pirates have been forced, at fisticuffs, to walk the plank, where one clings for dear life. They appropriate city spaces as if American capitalism’s instrumentalist view of life had gone dormant, and life might be wholly given over to play. They are positioned within a shallow space, as if the brick wall were a mere wooden stage set, painted to resemble a New York City tenement. They ignore the photographer as if she were not there, even as one stares right back, as if considering whether to invite her into the game. They threaten each other with violence as if it were fun. They dance dangerously high above the street as if they could be free from harm. They evoke the onset of World War II as if it were only a movie, as if the so-called “theater of battle” were mere child’s play. In perhaps the most intriguing statement she has made about her work, Levitt once said that she aimed “to photograph people outside as if they were inside.”

23 Ibid. p26-27.
This subjunctive mood gives Levitt’s pictures their uncanny sense of seeming to access the child’s Weltanshauung. By prompting the viewer to see a range of possible “as if” statements within the picture space, Levitt enacts for us precisely the way children experience their make-believe play worlds.

Ultimately, I am arguing that Levitt’s ‘unconscious obsession,” to return to Iturbide’s words with which I began, is not so much childhood itself but liminal states of being. This may be why the theme of childhood tends to recede in the latter part of her career, though it never disappears. It was, I claim, the fascinations of child discourse that awaked her ability to perceive that great theme. After all, the child is the liminal figure par excellence. To be a child is to have emerged from the inchoate state of nature but not yet to be fully socialized into culture. Childhood in Western culture’s modern era has signified a reservoir of the wild, the natural, and the spontaneous. Moreover, the concept of childhood was, during Levitt’s early career, poised in a kind of liminal suspense, as I have discussed. Once working class children had been removed from the exigencies of labor in 1938, would they be entirely free to play? How would the upheaval of a new mass media world, and a world of total war, change childhood?

My intention, then, has been to show that the roots of Levitt’s engagement with children grew out of the soil of her time and place. It is embedded in child mania. But Levitt cultivates a strange flowering of her own, as her representations turn dominant ideas about childhood in new directions. In reading Levitt’s pictures of children’s art and play within the context of their time, one finds that her turn to the playful, mischievous child moved her work away from the aesthetic paradigms to which many of her contemporaries adhered. Her representations of children’s art and play enabled her to imagine anew the dominant assumptions of 1930s documentary photography, even as she used the theme to speak of a particular time, place, and social class. By
fusing the fantasies of play with the realist attributes of the photographic medium, Levitt devised a way to operate at the juncture of art and social engagement. Focusing on the figure of the child enabled Levitt to achieve a liminal aesthetic position between the ethos of social documentary and the dream-worlds of surrealism. Her devotion to child’s play helped her to cultivate a deliberate ambiguity, blurring the boundaries between objective and subjective worlds. In her treatment of children’s play, Levitt was thus able to produce work that was both of its time—as Baudelaire said modern art must be: *il faut être de son temps*—and ahead of its time.