

Prayerfully and Powerfully, New York City Before and After

By SARAH BOXER

There is a prayer circle at the Museum of Modern Art, and it's not for Gerhard Richter, the German painter.

Just around the corner from Mr. Richter's retrospective is "Life of the City," a three-part show of New York photographs. The first part is taken from the museum's own collection: framed pictures by Weegee, Helen Levitt, Lisette Model, William Klein, Robert Frank, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Thom-

A 1945 photograph by Helen Levitt in the three-part "Life of the City" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

as Roma, Irving Penn, Diane Arbus and so on. Most are black and white. The second part is devoted to snapshots that New Yorkers have taken of the city to express their relationship to it. The pictures are tacked to the wall with pushpins and will never be attributed or returned to the photographers. Most are in color.

The last part of the show is where the prayer circle is. People are huddled around two monitors, back to back, which flash pictures, one by one, from last year's impromptu exhibition in SoHo showing pictures from Sept. 11, "Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs." The room is silent as the pictures click by.

Many of the images are familiar by now: pedestrians covered in white ash, a tea set covered in white ash, fruit covered in white ash, poles and walls covered with "Missing"

pictures, vigils, "Have you seen my daddy?" signs, angry and loving messages traced in dust, cranes by night, darkness by day, ruins at all hours, crushed taxicabs, firehouses, firefighters in the black jackets with their yellow stripes, headless mannequins, wreckage, funerals, people looking up on a sunny day, the World Trade Center on fire, the collapse of the towers, the dusty, silent narrow streets.

In the museum gallery it is utterly quiet. For the first time in a long time there are many strollers and wheelchairs in the gallery. It is not the usual museum crowd. The scene is more like a religious ceremony. This is the new New York, the mourning, bewildered city, that people are getting to know. But how does it relate to old New

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Museum of Modern Art



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Visitors around monitors at the portion of "Life of the City" showing Sept. 11 photos.

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York, the city that was before the city was attacked?

Many of the classic photographs of New York, the ones owned by the Museum of Modern Art, show the city as exceptional: exceptionally high, exceptionally fashionable, exceptionally rich, poor, weird, glamorous, sinister, rough, energetic, crowded.

A 1905 picture from the Underwood & Underwood studio is taken from high above Fifth Avenue, showing a man on a scaffold.

A city in all its extremes, through time and tragedy.

The city is exceptionally high. There is a Weegee picture of the giant white glove of Mickey Mouse during the setup for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The city is exceptionally surreal. There is a Louis Faurer shot of a boy in a striped shirt shivering in front of the chalk outline of a dead man, with the top labeled "head." The city is exceptionally rough.

There is Lisette Model's 1943 picture of a fashion show at the Hotel Pierre that shows two rich women, one glaring at the camera, one engrossed in conversation. The city is exceptionally snotty. There is a 1945 Helen Levitt shot of a woman with head buried in a

stroller while the child in the stroller laughs. It looks as if the woman dove into the stroller and popped out as a child. The city is exceptionally surprising.

There are portraits of exceptional talent: Harold Ross, Alfred Barr Jr., Lionel Hampton. And there are numerous instances of the oddity of the city. A 1989 Bruce Gilden picture shows a strange large woman with a malformed nose. She is on a corner, a key around her neck, a cigarette in her mouth. Even an ordinary picture of a man on a subway, taken by Mr. diCorcia in 1987, has its quotient of the bizarre. The man is holding a large plastic bag with a goldfish inside, and the goldfish has the fashion sense to match the orange subway seat.

The snapshots are something entirely different. In them the extremes of class, wealth, roughness and weirdness are toned down. The children aren't as mean. The wealthy aren't as snotty.

Despite this, the snapshots appear to be reaching for some symbolic significance. There is a whole contact sheet showing a flag that is pieced together from the individual frames on the roll of film. There is a picture of a doll dumped in a subway station. There is a woman with a gas mask with the World Trade Center behind her. There is a wall full of notes fluttering on a wall and a portrait of a dead yellow bird. There are many shots of the World Trade Center.

One way to make sense of these snapshots is to see them as a kind of buffer zone between the New York that existed before Sept. 11: a strange place to fear, loathe, strive for and be raucous in, and the New York of today: a strange place to mourn, worship, respect and be silent in.