

Arts & Ideas

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Child Photographers Show Lives of Hardship and Hope

By JULIE SALAMON

Judging from an unusual visual diary on display in a Manhattan art gallery, the globalization of childhood has a long way to go.

In the fall of 2002, a British charity supplied 13 Afghan girls, ages 10 to 14, with cameras and instructions to photograph their everyday existences. They produced images of bombed buildings, child laborers and wall drawings identifying different kinds of mines.

The accompanying texts deepen the poignancy. "My neighbor used to collect steel, and he thought a mine was steel he could recycle and took it," one girl writes in her photo caption. "He now cannot walk — he has lost a foot and a hand."

Another, explaining her photo of a woman wrapped in a burka and why she does not want to wear one: "Women have to do exactly the same as men, the same amount of work, but they are not treated the same."

The Afghan pictures are part of "Unbroken: Photography Subjects Speak Out," a show at Denise Bibro Fine Art, 529 West 20th Street, in Chelsea, through next Saturday. This collection of 60 photographs includes works by children from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital; the streets of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam; refugee camps in Nepal; and a school for the mentally and physically disabled in Bogotá, Colombia. The show was sponsored by K'ipay, a Bogotá school for the disabled, and PhotoVoice, a nonprofit organization in London, founded in 1998 to teach needy people



Left, Vo Cong Thang/Street Vision, for PhotoVoice; right, Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

A Vietnamese picture from "Unbroken: Photography Subjects Speak Out," at Denise Bibro Fine Art in Chelsea. Right, Ms. Bibro, the gallery owner, and George A. Carrano, who helped organize the exhibition

how to use cameras (and whose financial backers include The Economist magazine and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund).

How did such worthiness find its way to a commercial art gallery in fashionable Chelsea? By means of George A. Carrano, the retired Metropolitan Transportation Authority official responsible for swapping tokens for Metrocards. Mr. Carrano, who retired from the M.T.A. in 2000, was on vacation in London a couple of years ago when he wandered into a PhotoVoice exhibition in the basement of a church.

"For me, these photographs turned photojournalism on its head by putting the cameras into the hands of the people who are usually the subjects," Mr. Carrano said in an interview at the gallery. He elaborated on what inspired his passion. "It's like a Fellini film, all this despair, and at the end, this sense of optimism."

He was moved by pictures like "Selling Newspapers," a photograph of a delicate young boy in Ho Chi Minh City, holding a newspaper under one arm, gazing with tired eyes at the camera. The caption by the photographer, Vo Cong Thang, expresses that kind of optimism — or at least the desire for it: "Through my photos I want to show homeless children, try everywhere to earn money, they have their jobs: shoe-shine, selling lottery tickets. They are not involved in crime, drugs or 'bad' things as many people believe."

While Mr. Carrano had always been interested in photographs, he had traveled far more extensively in the five boroughs than around the world. The places represented by the young PhotoVoice photographers were foreign to him. He became determined to give such pictures a wider audience in New York and be-

came a PhotoVoice volunteer.

He arranged a small exhibition 18 months ago in a converted Army barracks in Rockaway, Queens. "It was hard to get to," he acknowledged. Then he managed to put 20 of the photographs on display at Columbia University last fall.

Those who saw the Columbia exhibition included Anna Lise Jensen, a photographer and flight attendant who had begun a similar participatory photography project at the K'ipay school in Bogotá. She met with Mr. Carrano and, through friends, approached Ms. Bibro, the gallery owner, about mounting a show of the children's work.

Ms. Bibro has a commercial gallery but was known to have a soft spot for underdogs. "I represent a few artists you would not consider financially viable, but who I think are doing important work," she said. Among them are Carol Jacobsen, an associate professor at the University of Michigan who specializes in works about women in prison and who donated a couple of pieces to an auction. Ms. Bibro is sponsoring to raise money for PhotoVoice.

"One of the reasons people have galleries is to educate and enlighten the public," Ms. Bibro said. "Some galleries don't want to remember that."



Nguyen Chau Thuy Trang/Street Vision, for PhotoVoice
In "Unbroken," Vietnamese children are both subjects and artists.