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DRAMATIC PHOTOS OF THE 1968 POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN IN
DC

By Cameron Cuchulainn and Jill Freedman, October 30, 2017



Return to Resurrection City with Jill Freedman's stunning documentation of a six-week protest on the National Mall.

This week at the Steven Kasher Gallery, Jill Freedman's documentation of the Poor People's Campaign gets revisited with the opening of an exhibition that accompanies the re-release of Freedman's first photobook. Originally published under a slightly different name 47 years ago, *Resurrection City, 1968* documents a movement called forth by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., just weeks before his assassination. Today it serves as a visual record of life in a protest camp that was constructed on the National Mall in Washington, DC, to demand reforms combating poverty in the United States.

In a March 18, 1968, speech to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, King asked, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?" He and other organizers

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rallied for a group of around 3,000 people to travel to the National Mall and bring their concerns over inequity, lack of opportunity, and insufficient wages to the White House's doorstep. Freedman, who at the time was working as a copywriter for the advertising firm Doyle Dane Bernbach, witnessed a man dressed in a straw hat and overalls giving a speech to a gathering crowd. This was Civil Rights activist and musician Jimmy Collier. Freedman recalled, "He was in Central Park one day with a mule talking about the Poor People's Campaign. 'Will you join us, come with us to Washington?' I said, 'Fuck yeah!'" She quit her job with the words, "Tell them I'm a photographer."

Self-taught and a novice, Freedman simply joined the demonstrators on one of the buses from New York City and began photographing. Speaking with her now, she relates that although she was untrained, she had been deeply affected by seeing photographs of the Holocaust as a child. As a young woman, she felt a sense of purpose when she first picked up a camera. Hoping to take photos that would transmit the sense of injustice she felt when she saw police beating protesters demonstrating against the Vietnam War, she snapped her way to DC with the intention to make images that would articulate both the campaign's reform goals and capture the history of this part of the civil rights movement. When she arrived, encampments set up around the National Mall formed the main hub of the protest. It was called Resurrection City, and for the next six weeks, Freedman lived in and photographed the ad hoc camp.

What distinguished her documentation was that, unlike the many photographers who covered the event on assignment, the demonstrator and self-assigned historian embedded herself for the duration of the camp's existence. Freedman remembers meeting writer John Neary and a photographer from LIFE while in line for the Campaign's food tent: "He said, 'How long have you been here?' I said, 'Well, I just came, and shot on the way down.' I had gotten contact sheets of [my photographs]... He looked at the pictures and said, 'Aw, can I have your film [and] take it back? At the very least, they can develop it and contact it for you.' He had to talk me into it—I said, 'No, no, they might scratch the negatives.' LIFE magazine!" But after Neary convinced Freedman to let him take her images back to New York City, LIFE included six of her photos in "A New Resolve: Never to Be Invisible Again," Neary's piece on the origins and events of the Poor People's Campaign. Getting published in what was essentially the front page of American media gave her the chops to soldier on as a photographer. Years later, with six weeks' worth of photos that documented the events of the Campaign, and support from publisher Richard Grossman as well as her idol, W. Eugene Smith, Freedman released a full survey as her first book, *Old News: Resurrection City*.

Resurrection City, 1968, this month's re-release of the book, features two introductory essays by authors that study photography as it relates to the history of protest movements. The first is by John Edwin Mason, an associate professor at the University of Virginia's Corcoran Department of History. The second is by Aaron Bryant, curator of Photography, Visual Culture, and Contemporary Political History at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Although the Poor People's Campaign would end in tragedy, it made small policy gains toward fighting poverty and in visibility for the American poor. Authorities ended up shutting the camp down, gassing the demonstrators as they sang freedom songs in the shadow of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination. In recent news, however, political leader Reverend William Barber II has announced that he is spearheading a new Poor People's Campaign to take place in 2018. Whatever it may bring, the original campaign lives on in Freedman's evocative images: the camaraderie and idealism of activism, the ways in which people worked together, the stark artistry of their political statements, and the interactions with the policemen who would eventually bring an end to the demonstrations. All of this, and more, was captured by Freedman's camera, and her pictures continue to serve as a record of the historic event. Both in the book and at her ongoing show, Freedman accomplished what she wished for when she first got on a bus headed toward the Capitol.

Jill Freedman: *Resurrection City* is on view at Steven Kasher Gallery at 515 West 26th Street in New York until 12/22/17. Freedman's works are included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the International Center of

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Photography, and the George Eastman Museum, among others. With photographic interests in both social science and humanism found in the streets, she makes regular posts to her Instagram account @jillfreedmanphoto and is represented by Steven Kasher Gallery, New York. In the future, Freedman intends to publish more photo books to augment the seven she has released to date, including Firehouse and Street Cops, which are featured in Cheryl Dunn 's 2013 documentary on street photographers, Everybody Street.