

The Museum of Modern Art

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WALL LABEL WILLIAM KLEIN

During the 1950s some photographers began to redirect the techniques of photojournalism away from subjects of high drama and universal understanding toward personal, subjective statements. For these photographers their new subject was the expression of their feelings about the world. Using the photojournalist's quick eye and sure-fire instincts, William Klein (along with Robert Frank, Louis Faurer, and others) helped create a new kind of photographic vocabulary, one based on gesture and bold graphics.

In 1954, at age 26, William Klein returned to his native New York City. An expatriate living in Paris, he had acquired a degree from the Sorbonne, worked as a graphic designer for Domus magazine, and, most important, studied painting briefly in the atelier of Fernand Léger. Léger's irreverent attitude towards art, his desire to move it out of galleries and studios to the streets, and his use of film and design made an indelible impression on the young Klein. The photographs Klein made on the streets of New York during this visit were the beginnings of an extraordinarily original career in photography that lasted ten years and influenced generations of photographers.

Because the work of his photographic predecessors and contemporaries was largely unknown to him and his own experiments with photography had been limited to light drawings, Klein was free to make photographs that were entirely his own. With an innate and unerring instinct for the potential power of graphics,

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he used close-ups, the blur of the long exposure, the wide angle lens, gritty large grain, and above all, the contrast of black and white to create photographs filled with energy and expressive of the boundless vitality of life in the streets -- physical, powerful, violent, often humorous, but never obedient to the dictum that art be obviously beautiful. He was drawing with the camera, using the shapes, forms, and lines of the objects in his frame to create discontinuities of scale and a flattening of the picture plane that resulted in photographs that were radically personal. This work, published in Paris in 1955 as the book New York, was an immediate critical success and won the Prix Nadar. Over the next ten years he published three more books, Rome, Moscow, and Tokyo.

From 1955 to 1956, while under contract to American Vogue, he made tough, off-beat and satirical fashion photographs which helped change fashion photography. In 1954 Klein made his first film, Broadway by Light, and by 1965 he had given up professional photography to make films. These include Qui Etes Vous Polly Magoo? (1960), Far from Vietnam (1967), Mr. Freedom (1967-68), Muhammad Ali the Greatest (1974), and most recently, The Little Richard Story (1979).

Susan Kismaric
Associate Curator

William Klein was born in New York City in 1928. He attended City College of New York but left one year before graduation to join the U.S. Army. He has lived in Paris since 1948, where he has worked as a painter, photographer, and film director.

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For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Pamela Sweeney, 956-7501, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.
