

The Museum of Modern Art

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WILLIAM KLEIN PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Eighty photographs by William Klein, made on the streets of New York, Rome, Moscow and Tokyo, will be shown by slide projection along with fifteen framed prints, in the third-floor Steichen Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art, from October 23 through January 1, 1981. Selected by Susan Kismaric, Associate Curator in the Department of Photography at the Museum, WILLIAM KLEIN is the first major museum exhibition of Klein's photographs in the United States.

During the 1950's William Klein (along with Robert Frank and others) was instrumental in redirecting the techniques of photo-journalism toward personal, subjective goals. In his photographs the photo-journalist's concern for what was important or newsworthy gave way to a concern for what the photographer himself deemed valuable. With the quick eye and sure-fire instincts of the photo-journalist, Klein helped create a new kind of photographic vocabulary, one based on gesture and bold graphics.

Born in New York City in 1928, the son of a middle-class merchant, Klein grew up on the streets of New York's upper West Side, spending more time in movie houses and art museums than in school. After serving in the U.S. Army in Europe, where he drew cartoons for The Stars and Stripes, Klein returned to Paris to attend the Sorbonne on the G.I. Bill. He began painting. Interested in the ideas and work of Fernand Leger, he spent several weeks

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in the artist's atelier. In 1954 Klein bought a camera from Cartier-Bresson to record a visit to his family in New York. The resulting body of work, a kind a hip tourist's celebration of New York's chaos and relentless energy, was published in Paris as the book New York. It was an immediate critical success, won the Prix Nadar, and established Klein as one of the most original photographers of his time.

In New York, the willful, controlled disorder of Klein's photographs offered a startling reflection of the profusion and complexity of life in the streets. Figures within the frame were precariously balanced, as well as juxtaposed, creating an unsettling discontinuity of scale. Disembodied hands emerged from the sides of the picture; heads popped out from the bottom. Children, adults, street signs, reflections and billboards were fixed in a tenuous order. Unlike the cool, elegant photographs of Cartier-Bresson, Klein's dark, grainy pictures were brash and provocative.

Over the next ten years he published Rome, Moscow and Tokyo. From 1955 to 1965, while under contract to American Vogue, his tough, off-beat and satirical fashion photographs helped change the face of fashion photography. In 1959 Klein made his first film, Broadway by Light, and by 1965 he had given up professional photography completely to make films. These include Qui Etes-Vous Polly Magoo? (1966), Far From Vietnam (1967), Mr. Freedom (1967-68), Muhammad Ali the Greatest (1974) and The Little Richard Story (1979).

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