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**William Klein**  
**All the World's**  
**a Stage**

William Klein (1926–2022) had a remarkable, wide-ranging and distinctive creative life. In street photography, fashion photography, filmmaking, painting, and graphic design, he made ground-breaking and truly innovative work that profoundly changed visual culture.

Born in New York, he settled in Paris in 1948 but led an international life, working in the USA, Europe, Asia and Africa. Whether on the fashion pages of *Vogue*, in his landmark photobooks, on the cinema screen or on museum walls, Klein's enormous appetite for life, his curiosity about people and his sense of wit and play informed everything he did.

Klein was one of very few image-makers with a unique visual style, defined by complex compositions full of energy and an exuberant sense of presentation. This came from his early years as a painter interested in the scale of murals, architecture and cinema, but also from his joyous way of involving himself in the lives of others. He did not observe from a safe distance. He reached out, collaborating with fashion models, and inviting strangers on the street to pose and play for his camera.

*All the World's a Stage* is an overview of William Klein's vast body of work. Rather than presenting a chronology, it looks at how his sense of performance and theatricality shaped all that he did. We see how his photographs and films emerged from a spontaneous and improvised attitude to life. We see how he broke the rules and conventions of art, photography and documentary. We see how his love of abstraction flowed into his figurative work.

Klein was a fiercely independent artist who was able to work at the centre of the commercial world while pursuing his passion projects. He did everything his own way, always with a great feeling for style and vitality, and for the unpredictable ways that life unfolds.

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Photographer, painter, filmmaker and graphic artist, William Klein (New York, 1926 – Paris, 2022) is one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. A multidisciplinary artist, he has revolutionised certain fields such as fashion and street photography. During the World War II, after joining the U.S. Army, he was stationed in Germany and later France, where he permanently settled after being discharged. In 1948, Klein enrolled at the Sorbonne, and later studied with Fernand Léger. In 1957, he was awarded the Prix Nadar. His works on major world capitals (New York, 1956; Rome, 1959; Moscow, 1964; Tokyo, 1964; Paris, 2002) have helped to make him one of the most illustrious photographers of his generation. In the mid-sixties, he devoted himself to

cinema. There followed nearly twenty documentary films, feature films and fiction. The film *Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?* (1966) received the Jean Vigo Prize in 1967. In 2005, the Centre Pompidou in Paris devoted a major retrospective to his work, followed by Tate Modern, London, in 2012. Multiple exhibitions, dealing with different aspects of Klein's work, have been presented over the years in places like Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels, Chengdu, Madrid, Milan, Rouen or Seoul, among other. In 2022, a retrospective exhibition of his work, *William Klein: YES: Photographs, Paintings, Films, 1948–2013*, curated by David Company, was shown at the International Center of Photography, New York.

## Looking Back

On the streets of New York in 1954–1955, and later Rome, Moscow, Tokyo, Paris, and other cities, William Klein was never trying to be secretive. There would be eye contact, and often conversation. From a brief and excited exchange of glances, a photograph might emerge.

At *Vogue*, he had a strong and spontaneous rapport with the various models, often inviting them into the playful game of making the photographs.

We can never know the exact nature of what goes on between a photographer and those in front of the camera. The image will give us clues, but never the full story. A photograph is like a poem – fragmentary, suggestive, and open to the viewer's response. Nevertheless, we can say that the gazes that were returned to William Klein are signs of a rich, complex and ephemeral social world, and of a deep mutual curiosity.

## Material Gestures

William Klein's first artworks from the late 1940s and early 1950s were figurative paintings with graphic compositions that anticipated his street photography. He then turned to abstraction. An exhibition held in Milan in 1952 caught the eye of an architect, who asked Klein to adapt his work for an apartment room divider to be made of rotating panels. While photographing the panels, Klein's wife, Jeanne, spun them, making long exposure blurs. Fascinated with the effect, Klein went into his darkroom and produced hundreds of abstract photograms. This led to commissions to design covers for the magazine *Domus* and for music albums. In his street photography and fashion work,

he experimented with exposures, blur, camera movement, and grainy blow-ups of small sections of his negatives. There were no rules. His image-making was physical. Everything was possible.

## Tokyo

In 1961, William Klein was invited to Tokyo. Within days of arriving, he was exploring the city alone. The Japanese language was no obstacle: it forced him to connect through good humour, a sense of fun and an acceptance of the absurdities of communication. He encountered calligraphy classes, tea ceremonies, geisha homes, politicians, department stores, a hairdressing school, public protests, and much more.

On his last two days in the city, he made over six hundred images of modern dance in the street. Tatsumi Hijikata, Yoshito Ohno, and Kazuo Ohno strike poses that mix traditional Japanese choreography with aspects of Western avant-garde dance picked up from images of Martha Graham and Jerome Robbins. His Tokyo photographs became a book in 1964, the year the city hosted the Olympic Games.

## Films

For forty years, William Klein was a maverick filmmaker, renowned for his thirty groundbreaking documentaries and three feature films. Presented here is a showreel of extracts. Not believing in documentary truth or neutrality, Klein's films are characterised by a love of performance and collaboration. His 1964 documentary on Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) is an electrifying account of the boxer's personality and the commercial

spectacle of sport. It screened all over Africa, leading to Klein's commission to film the Pan-African Festival of Algiers (1969), a landmark celebration of black culture and independence politics. This was followed by a documentary about Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information for the Black Panthers, and another about the pioneering musician Little Richard.

Klein's first fiction film, *Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?* (1966), is an insider's satire of the fashion industry, a world he knew well. *Mister Freedom* (1968) is a wildly inventive and visually excessive response to USA's war in Vietnam, and the ever-closer connection between corporate power, consumerism, politics, and propaganda. *The Model Couple* (1977) predicted our dysfunctional world of "reality television". All Klein's films are studies of human nature and the often extreme cultural and political situations to which it leads.

Pause a William Klein film anywhere, noted the filmmaker Chris Marker, and you will see "a Klein photograph with the same apparent disorder, the same glut of information, gestures and looks pointing in all directions, and yet at the same time governed by an organised, rigorous perspective."

## Together

Many of William Klein's photographs of groups in the studio and the street are among his most original and best-loved. He liked nothing more than the tangled bonds between people and the unpredictable energy that would often erupt in his presence with a camera. Whether a fashion shoot, fans at sporting events, or a bunch of friends at a city corner, Klein was interested in the social dynamics.

Most often, he photographed with a wide lens. Filling his frame with faces and gestures meant being very close, often less than a metre away from the subject. Joyous, spontaneous, and occasionally a little tense, the world framed by William Klein feels like improvised theatre overflowing with the energy of life heightened by his presence. His remarkably organised compositions are full of wild vectors and micro-gestures, pulling the viewer's eye in many directions. In each case, Klein was a part of the situation, yet hyper-alert to its potential as a picture. He was an insider and an outsider at the same time.

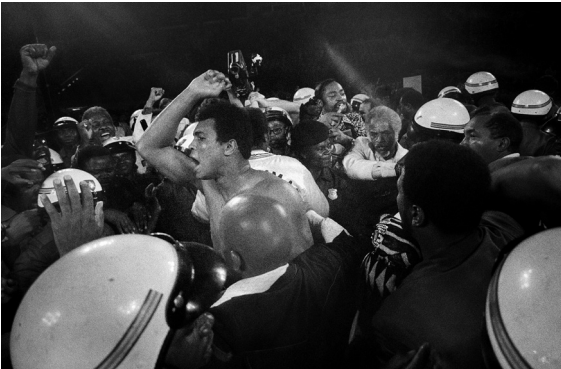
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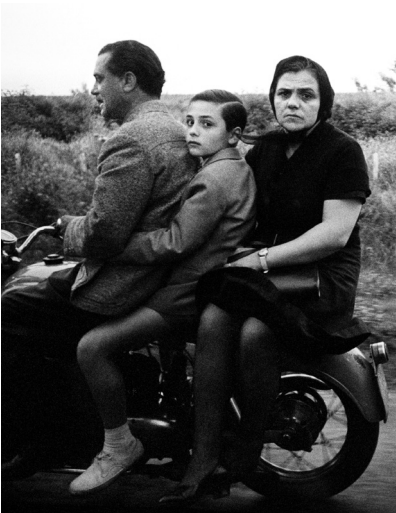
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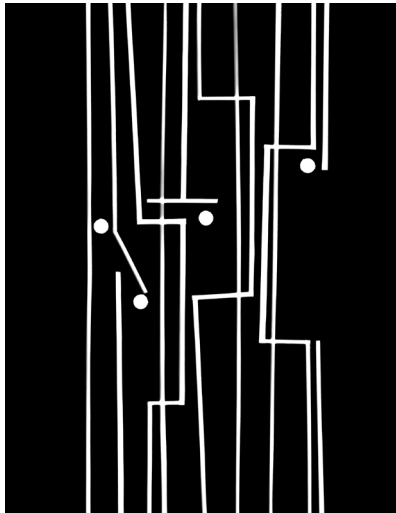
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1 Evelyn + Isabella + Nena,  
Mirrors on Roof, New York  
(Vogue, 1959)

2 Poster for the film  
*Qui êtes-vous Polly  
Maggoo?*, 1966

3 Ali's Victory in Kinshasa,  
Zaire, 1974

4 Inside Gum Department  
Store, Moscow, 1956.

5 Sunday Outing,  
The Holy Family on Vespa,  
Rome, 1956

6 Untitled, c. 1952

**William Klein**  
All the World's a Stage  
18/09/2024-03/02/2025

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Through the exhibition project and accompanying publication, Pierre Klein would like to pay tribute to William and Jeanne Klein, and to thank David Company, as well as Sérgio Mah and the entire MAAT team, for making it possible to showcase William Klein's work in this exceptional venue and also in the remarkable book.

#### **Agenda**

In conjunction with the exhibition, Cinemateca Portuguesa - Museu do Cinema is jointly organising with MAAT a cycle dedicated to the cinematographic work of William Klein taking place in January 2025.

#### **Publications**

The book *William Klein - All the World's a Stage* is available at the museum shop.

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exhibition guide



18/09/2024 → 03/02/2025

