

After a Storied Career, a Nonagenarian Photographer Returns to New York

The International Center of Photography, now on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, recognizes William Klein, 94, by turning over its entire space to his work.

By Jane L. Levere

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This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

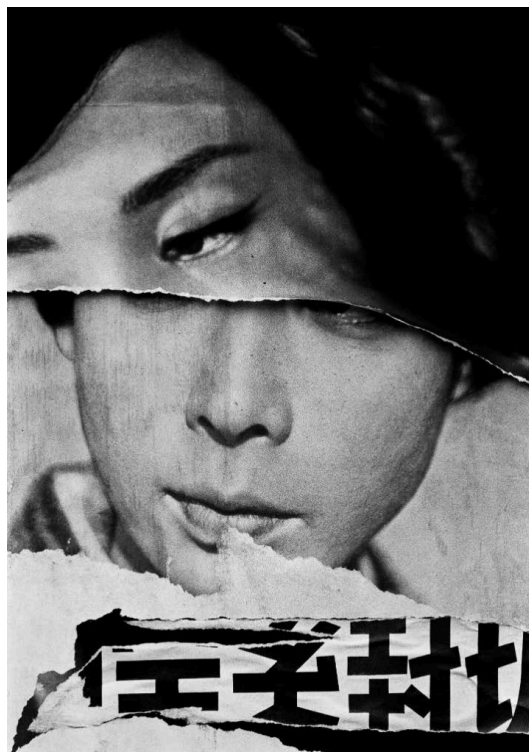
When the International Center of Photography hosts a retrospective of the work of William Klein this summer, it will be like a homecoming for the artist and a belated housewarming for the museum.

More than 200 photographs, graphic designs, abstract art, books and films created by Mr. Klein, who is 94, will be on display at the center from June 3 through Sept. 12. (Although the museum opened its new location on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 2020, the pandemic soon restricted access.)

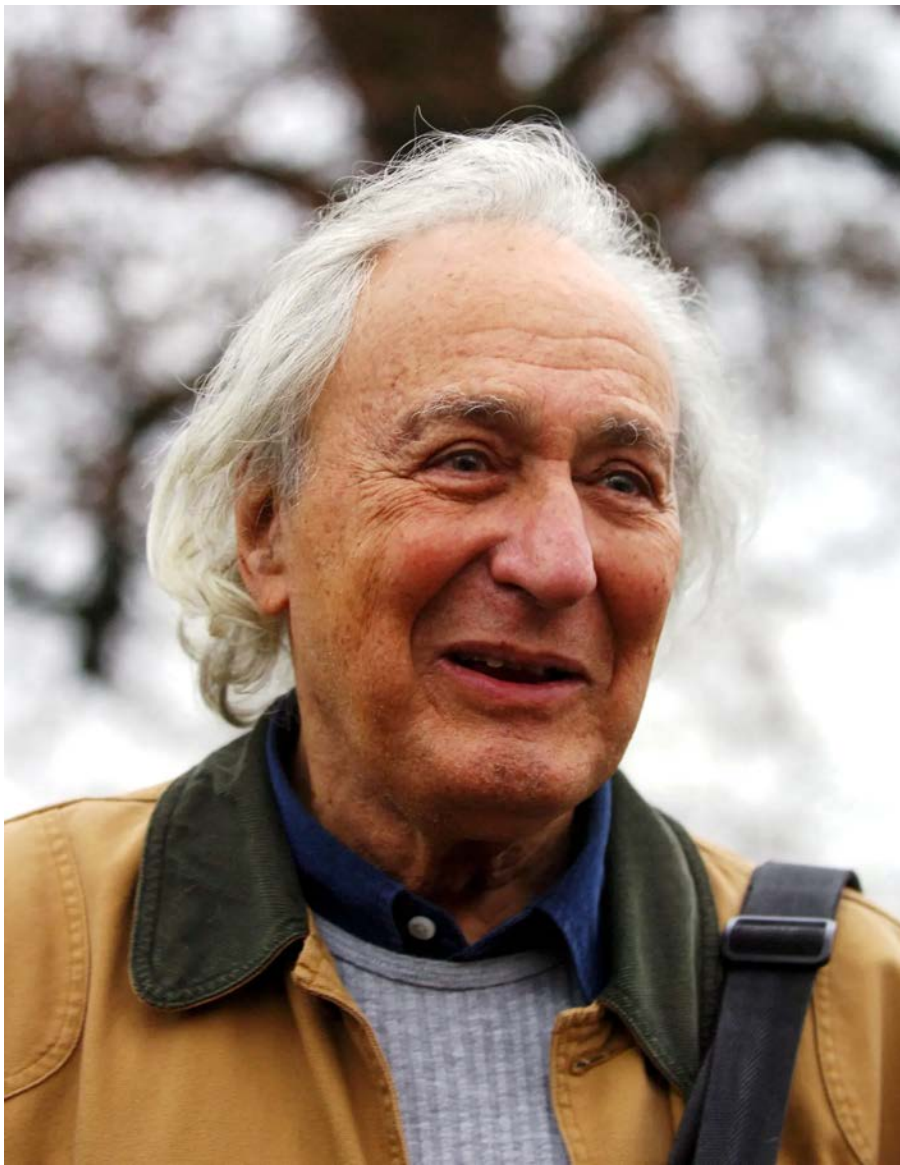
For the center, now in its fourth location since its founding in 1974, the exhibition marks a milestone — the first time its new space has been devoted to one artist — as well as a high point in Mr. Klein’s long career.

Over the years, Mr. Klein has crossed paths with many of the artistic figures of the latter half of the 20th century, and has been witness to many of its historical events. He suggested the title for his retrospective, “William Klein: YES,” which reflects his curiosity about all aspects of life, his openness to invitations and commissions and his constant desire to experiment.

The show will be “a homecoming for me,” Mr. Klein, who lives in Paris, wrote in an email: He grew up in New York City.



“William Klein: YES,” a retrospective coming to the International Center of Photography in Manhattan, highlights this artist’s wide-ranging career. It includes designs like “Cineposter, Tokyo,” above, a 1961 movie poster. William Klein



Mr. Klein, 94, has lived in Paris for years, but was born and grew up in New York City. The show, he said in an email, will be “a homecoming for me.” Alexandre MARCHI/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

David E. Little, the executive director of the International Center of Photography, said Mr. Klein had been “a global traveler, an artist’s artist who has lived and worked as an expatriate in fashion’s capital of Paris most of his life.”

“Still,” he added, “New York is his birthplace, and this exhibition is a return home. We are celebrating this return throughout our dramatically scaled exhibition spaces to showcase not only Klein’s groundbreaking fashion photography but his experiments across media, including films on Muhammad Ali and Eldridge Cleaver that historically connect to today’s most pressing social issues.”

In “William Klein: Yes” (Thames & Hudson, 2022), a book to be published in association with the exhibition, its curator, David Company — who is also the center’s curator at large — lists Mr. Klein’s many talents: Street, abstract and fashion photographer; documentarian and feature filmmaker; painter, writer, illustrator; and exhibition designer. And for many of his books, he was the photographer, writer, editor and designer.

Mr. Company said he had known Mr. Klein since 2008, when the artist “duly summoned” him to Paris after the publication of the curator’s book “Photography and Cinema” (Reaktion Books, 2008).

“For a while,” Mr. Company said in a recent interview, “people couldn’t get their head around the fact that he did so many different things. Especially in the United States, it was difficult for people to locate him. Audiences are more accepting now of talented artists ranging across different practices.”

Born at the edge of Harlem in 1928 and described in the forthcoming book as “a Jewish kid in an Irish neighborhood,” Mr. Klein frequented New York’s movie theaters and the Museum of Modern Art. He was inspired, the book says, not only by the museum’s Edward Weston and Farm Security Administration photography, but also by its European avant-

garde painting and sculpture.



The exhibition will fill the center's space with more than 200 works, including "Moving Diamonds," a photograph Klein took around 1952. William Klein

He joined the Army in 1946 and was stationed in Germany, winning his first camera in a poker game. He arrived in Paris in 1948 and has made it his base ever since.

With the support of the G.I. Bill, Mr. Klein had the choice of going to art school or taking lessons in a studio. He opted to enroll in classes with a master, the French painter, sculptor and filmmaker Fernand Léger. According to Mr. Company's book, Léger's "hard-won intelligence and complete lack of pretense appealed to the young Klein, who has maintained a pragmatic ethos."

Mr. Klein's paintings were exhibited in the early 1950s in Paris, Brussels and Milan, where an architect commissioned him to create a black-and-white room divider with six interchangeable panels. While Mr. Klein documented the results with a camera, his wife, Jeanne, a model, spun the panels so they blurred in the long exposure. Mr. Klein later said he saw "there was something that could be done with blurriness in photography."



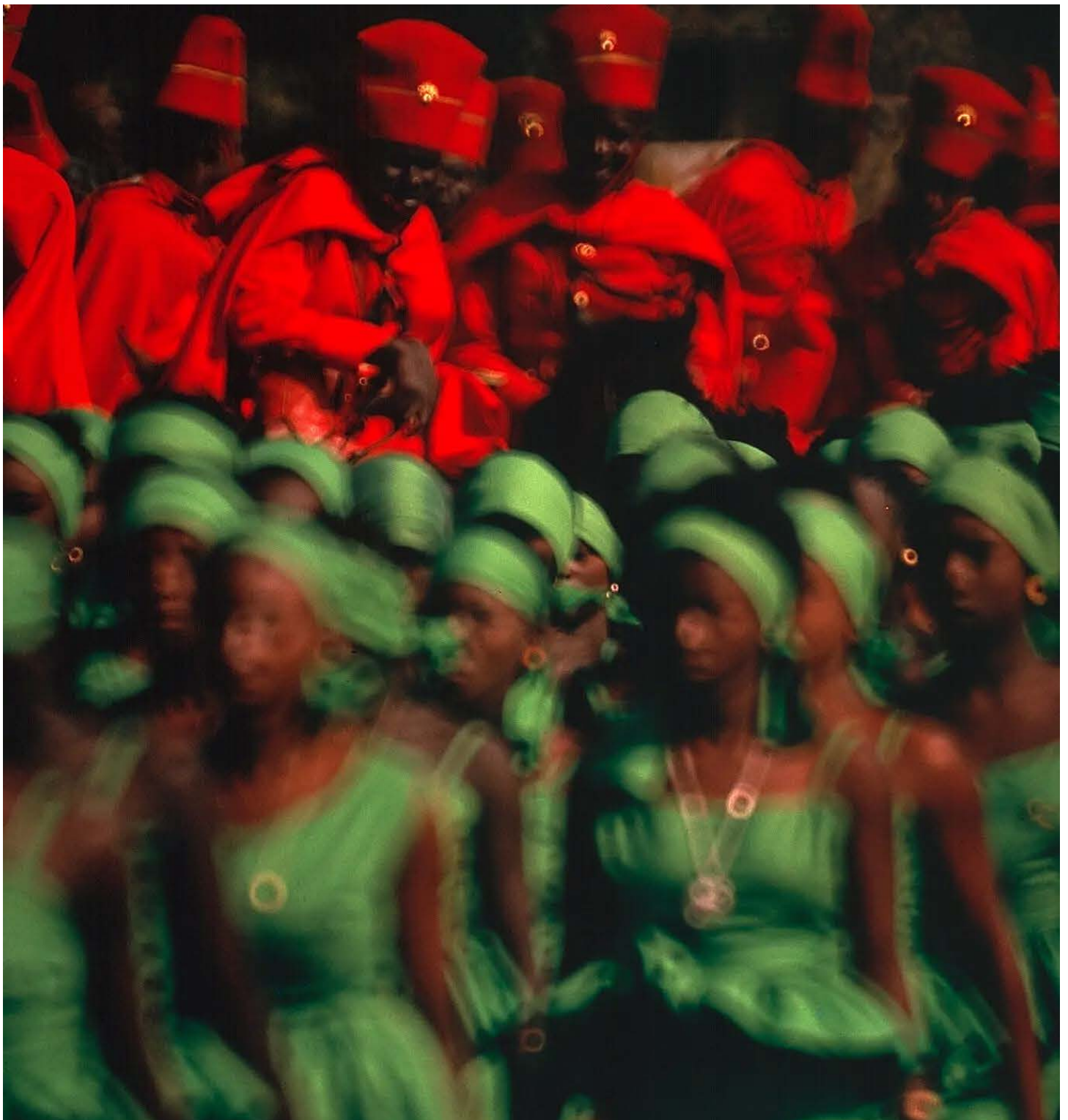
Mr. Klein has been a filmmaker and a painter. These are film strips from "Broadway by Light," his first cinematic project in 1958. William Klein

This experience led Mr. Klein to experiment in the darkroom with abstract images. His striking graphic designs soon appeared on the covers of magazines, books and records.

In 1954, Alexander Liberman, the art director of American Vogue, saw Mr. Klein's abstract photographs and offered him work in New York. According to Mr. Company's book, Mr. Klein "gained a reputation for stylish problem-solving" at the magazine. He shot social events and still lifes of shoes and fabrics, as well as hundreds of images of New York that he hoped eventually to turn into a book. Among them was an image, now famous, of a rack containing multiple copies of a single edition of The New York Daily News, arranged so the viewer notices the word "Gun" in each headline.

Mr. Company writes that "no American publisher would touch (Klein's New York book) project. Its form and content were too much." However, there was interest in it overseas: It was published first in Paris, then in Rome and London.

In 1956, Federico Fellini, whom Mr. Klein had met earlier in Paris, invited him to be his assistant. Mr. Klein helped the filmmaker by shooting pictures of prostitutes for his casting of "Nights of Cabiria." He also spent three months in 1956 photographing Rome, turning the images into another book.





“Independence Day Parade, Dakar,” a photograph from 1963, is one of the vivid images Mr. Klein created during his world travels. William Klein

Encouraged by Fellini and others, Mr. Klein turned to filmmaking himself, starting with the 1958 “Broadway by Light,” which is described in Mr. Company’s book as a “vivid, jazzy document of the illuminated signs of Manhattan.”

At Mr. Liberman’s suggestion, Mr. Klein later returned to fashion photography, working with models for the American edition of *Vogue*. According to the book, Mr. Klein admired “the controlled and consummate technique of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon,” but it was not for him.

“Klein felt the fashion studio was a little bubble of good manners, so he pricked it,” the book reports, adding that his “irreverence towards fashion made his photographs stand out.” A July 1959 *Vogue* fashion shoot, in which models are holding mirrors on the rooftop of a Manhattan building, exemplifies this irreverence.

Mr. Klein later made extensive visits to Moscow and Tokyo, shooting images that eventually became photography books that were published in 1964. One of his favorite photos from Tokyo is of a hairdressing school, which Mr. Company’s book describes as a “classic Klein composition, with interesting incidents happening simultaneously in every square inch of the image.” The text adds that it is “a minor miracle of timing and framing.”

That same year, Mr. Klein went to Miami to film the first fight between Muhammad Ali (then known as Cassius Clay) and Sonny Liston, producing “Muhammad Ali, the Greatest.” Several years later, he made his first feature film, “Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?,” described in Mr. Company’s book as “a slapstick satire on the excesses of the fashion industry,” which also has “a sad, bittersweet undercurrent.”

His other films include “Mister Freedom,” which Mr. Company calls a “vaudeville sci-fi comic-book drama”; “May Days,” shot during the May 1968 Paris uprisings; “Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther”; “The Little Richard Story”; and “Contacts,” a series of short films made for French television in which photographers used their contact sheets to discuss their working processes.



“Karl Lagerfeld” (2007), featuring that designer, foreground, is an example of Mr. Klein’s creative fashion photography. This was shot for Harper’s Bazaar. William Klein

His most recent work is “Brooklyn + Klein,” a 2014 book of photographs he shot in that borough in 2013.

Mr. Klein said in his email that he was “excited to have a retrospective” in the center’s new building. His connection to the neighborhood, he wrote, “goes back a long time.”

“My grandfather had a store down on Delancey Street,” he said. “It’s a pity that he died before I was born.”

Mr. Klein continued: “I feel that what I’ve done corresponds to the truth and the experience that I’ve had since I started to work. I think my work, especially on New York, should be conserved, developed, published and shown.”