

WILLIAM KLEIN: AN ICONOCLAST RECALLS

WILLIAM KLEIN is a photographer's photographer, still better known amongst photographers than photography's public audience, one whose innovations changed both documentary and fashion photography as we know it.

Klein's first book, *Life Is Good & Good For You In New York! William Klein Trance Witness Revels*, is up there in the photo book galaxy with Robert Frank's *The Americans*, both reviled by critics and embraced by photographers on their first appearance in the late 1950s, both continuing to inspire throughout the subsequent decades.

His career since has followed a winding road that took him into documentary and feature films, more photo books, fashion photography for *Vogue*, TV programs and commercials, painting, and photography once more as the art establishment wavered and collapsed in its original condemnation of this arch innovator.

A typical early reaction to Klein's New York photographs was this oft-quoted statement by one publisher, 'This isn't photography, this is shit!'

Klein needed little encouragement to talk long and lucidly in his Parisian-tinged New Yorkese about the first half of his remarkable career, at the London showing of his re-edited New York book.

Karin: Shall we talk about this touring show based on the new edition, *New York 1954–55*?

Bill: What happened was that in the last few years I thought it would be good idea to do a summing up of the things I did in photography, and I did a book in 1989 called *Close Up*, and right after that I got an assignment from the city of Torino to do a book like *Close Up* on the World Cup in Torino, of how an uptight northern city would be transformed by the soccer teams. Then I did *In And Out Of Fashion*.

There is an editor in Paris who had dreamed up a consortium of six European editors who would do the same book, which meant that instead of having a book done in England that would be distributed by somebody in Switzerland, there would be a local editor who would work with it harder, and who would know better people to contact for press and so on. He contacted me and said, are there any books that you'd like to do, and then these editors would publish it?

Everybody has been asking me, since I came back to photography, what about this New York book? Where can you get it? I thought it would be a good idea to redo it and differently. The first book [*Life Is Good and Good for You in New York! Trance Witness Revels*] that I did was my first real project in photography. As far as photographs and book design was concerned, at that time books of photography were so similar, white page on the left and a photograph on the right, and even Robert Frank's book which came out later was not a visual book. The editor who brought it out, Robert Delpire, had a photograph on the right and quotes about America on the left, because that was the only way that people could really be convinced to buy a book to know that words were going to make it come into focus. I was a painter and a graphic designer, and I was going to do a book as a designer plus photographer, and not somebody just preoccupied with the photographs.

Now this book [indicates the new edition, *New York 1954-55*] is a film maker's book, because there is no layout at all, just double pages and full pages, more like a movie really. The two conceptions were very different. A lot of people say the first book is unique, that it was a good book, that it was fabulous, but it's not true because a lot of the stuff in the first book I can't stand anymore. It's too design-y, a little bit like magazines like *Interview*, or *The Face* or something. You could see the effort of making photographs to fit into a design concept. Also going back to the context of that period, I discovered a whole lot of photographs that I didn't use in the first book, because I was doing something innovative, and I wanted photographs that were really examples of new ways of taking photographs and printing them and so on.

So a lot of photographs that I used in this book I didn't even enlarge at the time, because I thought, well, what's the big deal? For example photographs like this, which have been used for the press actually and now I like a lot, but then I didn't even enlarge it, some black guys horsing around in Harlem [*Funk*, pages 186 + 187], holding

Pepsi Cola bottles, a typical way of taking photographs – cock-eyed framing, grab shot and so on – nowadays it really touches me because it's impossible for a white photographer to hang out in Harlem on Lennox Avenue and horse around with these guys, and say, 'Do this, do that.' 'Hey why d'ya wanna take my picture?'

It has another layer of meaning for me than it might have had at the time. A photograph like this I also didn't use, and for me it knocks me out, because if there is such a thing as primitive photography, this is it [Funk, 15th page]. I mean it's so primitive, you know, like it's really a dopey snapshot that someone who is blind would take. This also was not used, because I thought that this accent on this kid who is climbing the railings of a playground [Funk, 6th and 7th pages], a homeless guy sleeping on a bench behind, it would be too heavy an emphasis on the contrast. But, the reality of today is that there are more and more people homeless, and it's not an isolated case. This is New York.

Now this is a photograph also that was not used [Funk, 4th and 5th pages], because this is the one that was used from that sitting [Funk, 2nd and 3rd], and that's the one that's famous, but next to that photograph there is a whole bunch of photographs like this [Funk, 4th and 5th pages]. I thought I would do in this book something that I'd done here, show a photograph next to the photograph that was used, so in a way this is the photo, but this one is not bad at all as far as I'm concerned, and it shows how I was just grabbing everything as fast as I could.

These [I Need, 24th and 25th pages] weren't used, and there's sort of a feeling about old cars . And this picture [I Need, 16th and 17th pages], it was tiny. 'Peanut Headquarters of the World'. I forget whether this was in the first book or not. If it was, it was small. And this [Funk, 35th page] was tiny also in a layout where I did it like a comic strip with a whole bunch of about 25 photographs in 5 or 4 strips or 6, right across the page.

Here's a photo I never used also. This kid imitating a bank dick [Gun, 9th page], it's kind of full of information that you would never see nowadays – the way the kid dressed, the rolled-up jeans, the pompadour, and the fact that here's a thing that I just walked by on the street and saw, this kid dreaming that he would have a gun in his hand. So, it's a different book, and errrr, I kinda like it. I like it better. There's a nostalgia. And this is a photograph I never used [5 & 10, first page], and I like it also, the pathetic cut of this coat – 'bargain, \$14.95, 5 and 10' – there she is at the counter ordering a ham sandwich or something.

Karin: You were a different person then, also.

Bill: I was different, New York was different, the world was different, the look that people have in New York is different. When I look back at the contacts I realise there was a sort of an innocence about New York. But when I did the book everyone said, 'Oh boy, this book is so dark and grungy, and violent and negative and so on.' When you look at New York today, this seems like the good old days, and it's true that these aren't the sort of pictures you could do today. This picture [Streets, 4th and 5th pages] also was never enlarged either, and I like the cars, and look at the guy there!

Karin: He looks like a Texan there, with his Texan hat and cigar.

Bill: Yeah, I call him a 'small operator,' with that Stetson.

Karin: There's a lot of innocence and openness in the people in your book.

Bill: To me there's innocence. This is my old neighbourhood, this is me, I'm somewhere there.

Karin: Which part of New York is that?

Bill: Well, I was brought up in Manhattan, and I was born in the last house on Fifth Avenue. When you go up Fifth Avenue, above 100th Street it goes downhill, and this was on 109th Street where I lived. 110th was the end of Fifth Avenue. A lot of things happened there. Here's some things that'll give you a fix on where it is. For instance, do you remember that famous case of the Wall Street woman broker who jogged in the evening, and who was raped and nearly killed by a gang of black kids out for what they called 'wilding,' at dusk?

They beat the shit out of her, and everybody raped her, and everybody thought she would die, but she survived and they had a court case, and she fingered all these guys. The point is I lived on 109th Street and Fifth Avenue, and just opposite there's what they called the Slocum or something like that, a housing project, and three of the kids in this gang lived there.

I grew up there when it was all a lower middle class, bourgeois, Jewish neighbourhood. Harlem was Jewish on the edges, and in fact one of the reasons that the blacks are so anti-Semitic is that most of the houses

belong to Jews, and so the rent-gouging, eight-people-living-in-a-two-room-apartment-that-was-costing-a-fortune thing was from the fact that these grasping landlords, or shopkeepers, were giving them a hard time.

Karin: Like in the Mel Brooks film, *Life Sucks*?

Bill: I never saw that film, but anyway here're these black kids in a playground somewhere, and I'd go up and say, 'Hey, hold it there, don't move, stay there.' But you wouldn't do that today. The kid would say, 'Fuck off man. What do you want my picture for?' Here's a kind of Mafia nightclub [*Album*, 12th and 13th pages], and I go in there (I had a flash) and I go from table to table and take photographs.

This guy [on the far left] looks kinda suspicious, but the others... He asks me, 'Where's your card, ya have a card?' And I say, 'No, I ran out of them,' or some bullshit. But you could do that sort of thing. Everybody was so excited.

This is a big face in the centre of a crowd [*Album*, pages 16 and 17], a sort of photograph that I invented by plunging right into the middle of a crowd, hardly aiming. What's kind of amazing to me is here I am, 50, 60 centimetres away from this person and she doesn't even see me. Nobody sees me. I'm obvious but I'm normal, and I don't make a big deal out of it. Everybody says about this [5 & 10, page 125] that it's a violent picture, but it's actually a piece of theatre because I say to this kid, 'Look tough!'

He looks tough. For me it's a like a self-portrait because there's this tough kid and this timid little kid, angelic-looking. It's a mixture of what I was when I was a kid. I was also coming on strong, playing cops and robbers, but I would also be afraid of going into the wrong neighbourhood, and getting beat and stuff.

Karin: Didn't you say to people that you were the Inquiring Photographer from the *Daily News*?

Bill: They'd say, 'What's this for?' I'd say, '*The Daily News*.' 'No shit?' 'Yeah, yeah, the Inquiring Photographer.' 'When's it coming out?' And I'd say, 'Uh, tomorrow.' 'No shit?' You'd be amazed. But I was looking for *The Daily News*... here [5 & 10, pages 126 and 127] this is the New York Daily News, and it used this kind of typography, had these big photographs, a lot of grain, very black, and badly printed on newsprint, and it was maybe my main influence. I wanted to do a book like that. So it was the same typography that I used, and also this sort of tabloid roughness to the printing.

Karin: How did you feel about New York City on coming back to it after all those years away in Europe?

Bill: I was living in Paris for six years, and in coming back to New York I got a great charge out of the fact that I could take photographs and say what I thought about the city. I could understand things that I saw, that struck me because I was a native New Yorker, and yet I could see things native New Yorkers couldn't see.

I was looking with one European eye and one New York eye, and also I always felt excluded from the city when I was a kid because of the division between the people who had it all and the people who don't have too much, and my family didn't have too much. So you'd have the society columns, the gossip columns about all these people running around nightclubs, about who was dancing with who last night, a little bit like the scene in Woody Allen's *Radio Days* where the gossip columnists get together and they say, 'Hey did ya see Clark Gable the other night at the Cococabana?' and everyone thought they were part of this brilliant scene in the Big Apple, but they were nowhere, living life by proxy, and they still are, living a substitute life of excitement – Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, Madonna.

I had uncles who I ran into when I got back who'd say, 'Ya get Bob Hope over there? How about the Knicks? Ya see the Knicks?' Very funny, because now you see the Knicks on TV, but in those days it was kind of a joke for me that what the Knicks were doing or what the Giants were doing was their big preoccupation. They were wondering whether in Paris people were following what the baseball teams were doing, and whether you could get Bob Hope, or what, and it was such a joke.

Karin: Why did you choose to live in Paris?

Bill: Well, I was a painter. I was part of a generation that always dreamt of going to Paris to be an artist.

I was in the occupation in Germany, and they chose 25 soldiers out of their records who'd come out of the university at 18. I spoke a little French, so they sent us to Paris for a Franco-American friendship deal, and I went to the Sorbonne, took theatre classes, did a whole lot of things. So as a soldier I was in Paris for a year and a half, and I got discharged there, and I worked at being a painter, and that's what I did for five years.

Then, little by little I got to know what to do. I went to Leger's studio for a while because if you had the GI Bill of Rights you had to go someplace that was an official

school. There was the Beaux Artes, there was another school, and then there were two studios. One was André Lhote's, and the other was [Cubist artist] Fernand Leger's, and obviously there wasn't much chance you'd choose anything other than Leger.

The whole atmosphere of being in that kind of a school where everyone was doing sub-Leger paintings... the charm wore off pretty fast. So I would work at home and come to the Correction on Friday, and bring what I'd done at home, and he would comment on it, and he was an influence.

Leger was somebody who would turn us on to other things that weren't part of the ambitions we'd had. For us, there was Picasso, and exhibitions, and collectors, and selling things. Leger was saying, 'Get out into the street, work with architects. Half the sign painters are doing stuff 90% more interesting than anything you'll see in galleries,' and there was another way of thinking.

Plus the fact that instead of looking at the recent history of painting, he'd take us back to the fifteenth century in Italy and mural painting and whatever. Also Leger had made movies, worked on movies, did costumes for ballet, did ceramics, he did murals, and he worked in a lot of different directions.

I had a feeling that we would also work in different directions. I mean I would work in different disciplines, like in the Bauhaus – painting, photography, typography. design, movies. That was pretty soon part of the five year plan. They all happened, because when I did the book, I'd say, 'Why not do the layout, and design the cover?' I mean, I still do that.

When I do my movies I work my ass off, getting the letters right and so on. In the movies nobody knows that I do the poster, the credits, I do the sets and so on. I always felt that as a photographer, if I didn't do all these things then it's not my work really. If you work for a magazine like *Life*, a guy comes in, gives 200 rolls of film to the lab, the picture editors are going to go through them and choose the photos, and the layout guy will see what picture is the first choice, then lay them out. They're no longer the guy's photographs. When it comes down to the captions and the text, it can be very annoying when people do the opposite of what your photographs were about.

Karin: Well, the context of the pictures' use affects their meaning.

Bill: Of course. When I did my first photographs in Moscow there was a magazine – it wasn't a bad magazine – they said, 'We'd like to do a portfolio', so I thought that would reimburse some of my expenses. I gave them 20, 30 photographs to fool around with, and they did this layout. There were these people standing in line from 3:00 in the morning waiting for a piece of bread, and this woman writer made everything sound like it was a really dramatic, hopeless situation. I knew the atmosphere of the photograph was contrary to that.

Karin: Are you going to re-issue your Moscow, Tokyo and Rome books now that you've redone *New York*?

Bill: That's it, that's it! Well, maybe. No, for me the *New York* book was very important. It was the first and it was a new way of taking photographs, and in a way when I did the book I thought that would be the end of my adventures in photography because I never thought I'd be a photographer. Actually I thought it was a movie when I did the book, and I showed it to a movie producer that I was introduced to, and I said, 'I'd like to do a movie like this,' because I was frustrated. I saw all these things happening – the before, the after, the accents, the act, the bullshit, and so on.

We were missing so much, just having one photograph, one silent photograph. I said, 'Look, I see a film like this, without any scenario, going from one thing to the next. What about you? You see it?' And he said, 'No, I don't know what you're talking about!'

Karin: You did your film *Broadway By Light* not long after *New York*.

Bill: I did that a couple of years later. I did that in 1958, and I did it almost as a reaction to the fact that people thought my view of New York was limited, that I only saw the dingy, dark, tragic side of New York. I thought that something very beautiful, the electric light signs, were brainwashing you and became the spectacle that everybody wanted to bathe in and to photograph.

Every tourist who comes to New York wants to photograph them – 42nd Street, Times Square and so on. I thought something like that is so much a part of New York, the essence of New York, that somebody should really deal with it. And I did this film, *Broadway By Light*, and I guess it was the first Pop film. The cycles of the lights were movies for me, so I was juxtaposing

them all, mixing them with reflections, and cars, and rainy streets and all that sort of thing. It made a catalogue of a ready made artefact, of art and movies.

Karin: How did you find your way into fashion photography?

Bill: Fashion photography was there from the beginning in a way, not the photography but the fashion element because when I had done my first photographs they were in an exhibition in Paris, and [Alex] Liberman who was the art director of *Vogue* saw the exhibition and contacted me, and asked me, 'How would you like to work for *Vogue*?'

I was very much surprised. What could I do? The idea of making money – I had nothing against that because I wasn't making any money as a painter, selling a painting here and there. You couldn't live on it.

I said, 'What can I do?' He said, 'You could come to New York, be an assistant art director, you can do experiments.' So when I came to New York for something else, I took him up on that. He said, 'Well, on second thought if you hang around the office you'd go crazy among all these fashion maniacs. Do you have any projects?'

'I said, yeah. I want to do a diary of my return to New York,' and he said, 'We could do a portfolio on that,' and then gave me a charge account in a store. I bought film, chemicals, enlarger, the whole bit. I had a charge account in a lab, and they developed my film and did the contacts. The book wouldn't have been done if it hadn't have been financed by *Vogue*.

Vogue then was very different from *Vogue* today, because now it's more a supermarket tabloid. In those days it was a the monthly dose of culture for a whole lot of women. The first publications of people like Cartier-Bresson and Brassai were in *Harpers Bazaar*. They had a page – the way Brassai sees this and that, or Cartier-Bresson. These guys were not published in *Life* magazine. They were published by fashion magazines. There was a sense of fashion magazines bringing culture to the upper classes.

Karin: The way you approached fashion photography was radical for its day.

Bill: Once again I was an outsider. I was an outsider to photography, I was an outsider to fashion, and so the whole idea of doing things that weren't done in photography didn't bother me because I wasn't part of any school.

I hadn't been to any school, I had no axe to grind, I was no defender of photographic correctness. I felt that anything goes.

The liberty that people doing painting or sculpture had – photographers should have the same freedom. In fashion, all I was interested in was the photograph. The New York book was done with one camera and two lenses, and in the fashion photography I had assistants and stylists and flashes, all kinds of equipment that wasn't available before.

Karin: It's been said that you used street-y looking girls, not so much the top models.

Bill: In fact in my first shoot I worked with Dovima. Liberman had financed these out of the way projects like *Diary of New York*, but one day he said why don't you try your hand at fashion? After all, this is a fashion magazine.

And so they gave me some offbeat assignments, and one thing I did was four pages on stretch stockings. I photographed Dovima, her face and her hands holding this pair of stockings, and I tilted the easel of the enlarger so her face became elongated, stretched out of all proportion, and the hands as well. They went from the bottom of the page to the top of the page. The typography was also stretched out. I had a big headline, 'Stretch', and a whole row of feet that was stretched out of all proportion.

So I did offbeat assignments like that. In my first real fashion assignment I guess I drove the girls crazy, because I wanted to do something really weird, geometric, put your arm here, move it back there, do this and, ha ha. She had to be a contortionist. Little by little I thought that there were things I could handle.

My first collection was only about six months after I started doing these things. They said, 'Why don't you try your hand at doing a collection,' which was a big deal. In Paris was the collections, and Liberman said, 'What do you want to do? What are your ideas?' These collections issues are a big deal, and Avedon was working for *Harpers Bazaar*, and we were in competition.

We had to come up with something that people would pay attention to. So I said, well I've thought of using a telephoto lens, and putting the girls in the street with traffic coming by and without people paying any sort of attention. He said, 'Well that's kind of interesting. What sort of camera do you have?'

I said, 'I had a 35mm camera. with a 300mm lens.' He said, 'Well, our editor is kind of aging, with bad eyesight. If she saw these little contacts she wouldn't be able to check

them out, so why don't you go to Hasselblad in Sweden?' So they sent me there, and I bought all these cameras at the expense of *Vogue* – a big 500mm lens and wide angle lenses – the whole bit. I used the Hasselblad 6cm x 6cm.

Karin: Was that the time when you did that shot of the two girls on the Spanish steps in Rome?

Bill: Yeah, that was done that way, with the telephoto lens. It just flattened everything out.

Karin: Were you nervous when you started doing this kind of work?

Bill: No, because I just didn't care. I said, 'Fuck it, who cares about fashion?' But they were willing to let me find photographic ideas. I said, 'I'll show the press, but I'll try and find graphic solutions for these things.' I was also thinking about movies already, and thought it would be a first step towards using locations, assistants, working on schedule, working with a lot of people and using control. In a way I welcomed the idea of it being an apprenticeship in making movies.

Karin: What made you do *Qui êtes-vous, Polly Magoo?* Was that movie a result of shooting fashion photographs?

Bill: No, I had a producer who was interested in doing a film with me, and I had an idea of doing a slapstick film on media brainwashing, and using things that I knew something about – television, fashion, the movies, graphic techniques and so on.

It's a film about bullshit in the media at different levels. It was a sarcastic look also at French movies that played with fact, reality and fiction. I put it all together, wrote a scenario, and in France you know you get an *avance sûr recette* from a scenario, that you had to reimburse from the earnings of the film.

The scenario was well received and I was able to get this advance which was not a fabulous amount of money, but still it was about \$100,000. The producer got more money from elsewhere, and it was done on a shoestring, in an artisan way. My wife did the costumes, I designed the sets and everything else. There was a slogan then: 'We don't have any petrol, but we have ideas!' We didn't have too much money, but we had ideas when we did the film.

Karin: Who designed the sheet metal 'fashion' in the film?

Bill: We were going to have this girl who would be propelled into success, but we would have to have these special dresses that wouldn't be dated if the film was seen in five years, and I was wondering what kind of clothes to design.

The star at that time was Courreges, and I thought if I asked him to do it, it would be timely but in several years they would be quaint. I was wondering what to do that would be absurd and graphic. I knew some guys who were sculptors, who made musical instruments in aluminium. I had the idea of having them do the dresses, and my wife dreamed up these things that could be more or less worn. I thought it was so crazy if people applauded this unwearable dress, that it would be a comment on things in the fashion world. If I did something so way out, then nobody would do anything like it.

I was wrong, because Paco Rabanne came along and he did metal dresses and plastic dresses, and at the end of the year a lot of store windows had girls with aluminium paper, and gold paper and silver paper, and it was something that people are even doing today. People even today do a collection with metal in it, and people say, 'Oh, fantastic!'

Karin: As well satirising fashion, you changed fashion.

Bill: There are a lot of things in my films that did have an influence in fashion. For instance in my film *Mister Freedom* the guy who had the shop [Tommy Roberts, who called his Kings Road shop Mr Freedom.... Karin] in London ripped off the title and ripped off the ideas of making pop clothing out of the star spangled banner, the stars and stripes, and I read somewhere that he has his shop again. [Selling second-hand plastic furniture from the sixties in a shop near Covent Garden.... Karin.]

When I heard about that in the late sixties, I had done *Mister Freedom*, then I heard somebody had ripped off the ideas, so I asked my lawyer and I said, 'What can we do about that?' He said, 'Not much, because we have copyright for movies, for theatre, for musical comedies, novels, but not for clothing because who would have thought there would be a rip off of the clothing part?'

I never got a t-shirt out of that. I never even bothered to contact the guy, because the lawyer said there was nothing I could do. People who make movies nowadays think of the offshoots as much as they do of the movies. They make much more from the merchandising.

Karin: You made more political and satirical movies after that.

Bill: Yeah, I collaborated on the film *Far From Vietnam*. Several directors got together to discuss the Vietnam War, and I wasn't satisfied with the fact that it was a hodge-podge and mostly documentary, and thought there was another way of dealing with political things in a movie, and thought of doing a film which would be a comic strip, a circus, with people talking like [General] Westmoreland and Nixon and Kennedy, and that was the basic idea behind *Mister Freedom*.

It was a film like a circus with absurd, grotesque characters and costumes, and the French critics were put off by this, saying 'These actors aren't realistic. How can you believe them?' But that was the point. Ten years later there were films like *Star Wars* and a million science fiction movies! Also the reference to comic strips – in those days it didn't mean anything. You said, 'Oh, it's a comic strip', but nowadays when a director is asked, 'What does this mean?' he replies, 'It's a comic strip!' 'Oh, it's a comic strip! Yes!?!'

As if that was the excuse.