

Mr. Freedom: An Interview with William Klein

by Jared Rapfogel



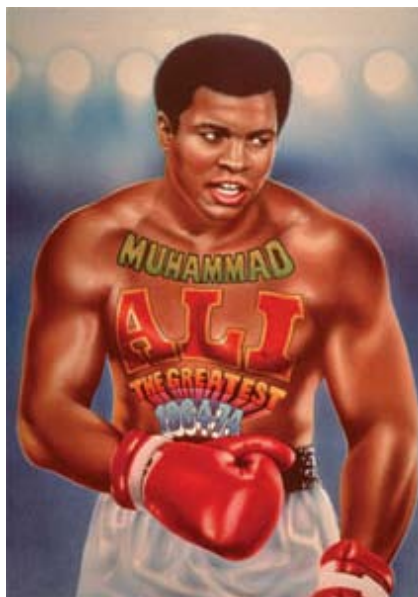
William Klein

*Though he made films with great regularity for a full four decades, characterizing William Klein's position in the cinematic firmament is a tricky endeavor, thanks partly to the unusual paths his life has taken, and partly to his own creative restlessness and adventurousness. Something of a prodigy during his childhood in New York, Klein began visiting the Museum of Modern Art and studying at City College as a teenager, found himself stationed in Germany and France during the war at the age of twenty, and shortly thereafter took advantage of the Franco-American Friendship Program to enroll at the Sorbonne, where he studied with Fernand Léger. An encounter with Alexander Liberman, the accomplished painter/sculptor who was also the art director of Vogue, led to the project which (after a long search for a sympathetic publisher) would eventually become his hugely influential book, *New York (Life is Good and Good for You in New York)*, as well as to an unexpected sideline as a fashion photographer for Vogue. In the midst of this varied activity, Klein turned his attention to filmmaking, producing a beautiful, impressionistic portrait of Times Square at night (*Broadway by Light*, 1958), inaugurating yet another parallel career that would ultimately produce some twenty short and feature-length films.*

Much better known as a photographer than a filmmaker, Klein has resisted categorization from the very beginning—he studied painting and sculpture before gaining fame for his street photography, whose unapologetically raw, muscular, expressionistic style shocked contemporary tastes. His fashion photography saw him exploring another side of his personality—one drawn to graphic design and stylization—that he couldn't express fully through his street photography, a dynamic mirrored in his films, which have alternated between documentaries and wildly exaggerated, satiric fictions. All of Klein's films reflect his deeply political, profoundly independent-minded sensibility, but they have done so in unmistakably diverse ways.

Cineaste spoke with Klein at the Thessaloniki Film Festival, where he was being honored, appropriately, with both a photographic exhibition and an extensive retrospective of his film work. A big, oversized figure—with his great frame and his unruly shock of hair—Klein was an overwhelming presence. His festival appearances (along with a few rumors) had suggested that he could be difficult—prickly, impatient, and unforgiving—but during the interview he proved anything but. Making himself comfortable in the plush lobby of the grand Electra Palace Hotel, he turned out to be friendly, funny, extremely generous with his time, and more than

willing to discuss his life and work. True to form, he was frank, uncensored, alert, and curious, interrupting the interview at regular intervals to chat with passing acquaintances and admirers (especially female ones), tell stories about other passers-by (such as Nico Papatakis, legendary owner of the Parisian nightclub La Rose Rouge, friend and associate of Jean Genet, husband of Anouk Aimée, and boyfriend of the Velvet Underground's Nico), gripe about how busy the festival organizers were keeping him, and ask some questions of his own (regarding the selection of films for the retrospective, the nature of the audience reaction, the history of Cineaste, and, his interest obviously piqued by his fellow Thessaloniki honoree, the degree of success John Sayles has enjoyed throughout his largely self-financed career). Among Klein's many talents, one of the most impressive has proven to be his uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time, making for an interview that encompassed not only his own artistic pursuits and developments, but many of postwar America and Europe's most crucial movements and events.



DVD for Klein's portrait of Muhammad Ali

Cineaste: *I wanted to ask first about your relationship to the French film scene in the Sixties and Seventies—you were there at a pretty amazing moment, making your first films, and I wondered how much you felt a part of that film scene?*

William Klein: Well, yes and no. If I had the opportunity to make films, it was thanks to people like Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. Because Chris Marker, you know, published my New York book. He was an editor at Editions du Seuil. I'd shown the photographs in New York to a bunch of editors, I happened to have a couple of friends who knew key persons at Scribner's and wherever, and they all said, "This is shit, this is not New York, we can't publish this!", and I didn't get anywhere. I mean, I didn't spend months running after these guys, but I didn't get anywhere. And I came to Paris, I saw a collection of travel books, tiny little pocket books, *Petite Planète*. They were really a new kind of travel book, they would give you all kinds of inside dope that you're getting nowadays, but nobody was getting at that time. The guy who was running that was Chris Marker, that was his baby. So I went to see him, and immediately he said, "We'll publish this."

Cineaste: *Did you know his film work already?*

Klein: No, I didn't. I just knew that he was publishing these little books. It wasn't the kind of film work that was easy to see, you didn't just go to a film house and see a film by Chris Marker, you had to be a little bit in the film world, and I wasn't. But Chris immediately said, "We'll publish this or I'll quit!" Chris was like their banner, and he threatened to quit about once a month. So it worked. He published the book, and then he introduced me to Alain Resnais, and they were crazy about New York, about America generally. This was a period when the French, especially young guys like that, were steeped in American films, books, and God knows what, but they didn't have enough money to buy a plane ticket, so I was like their American gadget. And they both said, "Now you've done this book, do films." The next time I went back to New York, I did this film *Broadway by Night*. To me it was a ready-made, I just took the signs and put them together with some other stuff. I borrowed a camera, bought some film, and shot it on Kodachrome 25.

Cineaste: *I noticed that both Marker and Resnais are credited on that film.*

Klein: Yeah, they said, "Now you have to finish the film, do postproduction, blow it up, do music," and they introduced me to Anatole Dauman. There were three of them there, and they called them something like the Three Stooges—they thought he was an asshole, and he was. He got an editor, who didn't really help me, he was a famous editor, but he was famous also for being at the racetrack every day. So I had a little assistant, I sort of improvised how to edit. I'd done the book and it was like editing, putting together a book.

So thanks to that film and the book, Louis Malle called me up and said, "How'd you like to codirect *Zazie dans le Metro* with me." Actually I was working on a scenario from the book because I really dug Raymond Queneau, and had wanted to do a film from another book, which was *Pierrot mon Ami*.

But anyway, when Louis Malle asked me to codirect the film, I said, "What does codirect mean?," and he said, "It doesn't mean anything because I'm well-known, you're not, and everyone will say it's a Louis Malle film." So we started to talk about how to translate Queneau into movies, and I was thinking at that time big letters, a sort of typographical painting, and I said, "First of all, we'll do all the posters in the city, not all, but those that would be in the background, and I'll do them, they'll be these abstract ads which won't say anything."

So I worked on *Zazie*. There are a lot of gags in the film, and most of the gags I worked out in 16mm. Louis Malle wanted to do a film like *Hellzapoppin'*, but he's a French intellectual, and you have to be like an American Hollywood moron to do *Hellzapoppin'*. So I thought the result wasn't really good, it was too methodical, as far as slapstick was concerned. But that was my first contact with cinema. I'd never seen rushes, and I saw scenes that were shot eight times, and I thought it was fantastic. I said, "Listen, we're doing a film on Queneau, so why don't we use a shot several times?," and everyone looked at me [laughs].

Cineaste: *That sounds like your photographic background cutting through a lot of the conventions of cinema.*

Klein: Well, no, in photography you have to choose a photograph, you have a lot of them. It's the same process, you have to basically end up throwing stuff out.

Cineaste: *But when you were turning towards filmmaking, did you see that as an extension of your photo work?*

Klein: I'll tell you, when I was a kid, I didn't know who made films, all I knew were actors. Sunday we would go to the movies with my family, and we'd go to the Riviera on 97th Street and Broadway, and there'd be a feature, two short subjects, two cartoons, a newsreel, and a stage show, like six or seven hours on a Sunday for, like, for cents. I didn't know that there was a director. I mean, I just thought someone said, "Get on the horse and fall off," or "Shoot them down," or whatever. I didn't know the name of any director. Suddenly, for the first time, I saw somebody who physically really made a film, and was a filmmaker, that was Chris Marker and then Alain Resnais. Well, Alain Resnais, this was in 1958, he was not yet a household name. He was always on a bicycle, carrying a camera on his shoulder, going to shoot a film. *Zazie* was the first time that I really saw something being shot. That's not true—I had a photographic assignment once when Robert Rossen was doing *Alexander the Great*, with Richard Burton. So I saw that—that's the sort of film that could've turned me off making movies. I remember they had the whole Spanish army there, as extras, and Rossen was waiting for the sun to go down to get this shot. Everybody was standing around, playing cards, jerking off, waiting and waiting and waiting. It was such a big-deal production, and suddenly everyone said, "The sun's going down," and in no time they did that shot.



Klein's window into the fashion world in *Who Are You, Polly Maggoo*

Cineaste: *Was the decision to devote yourself to filmmaking a gradual one?*

Klein: There was this thing with Louis Malle, and then I was hooked on doing movies, and I had the possibility of doing things for French television. They had a very good documentary program called *Cinq colonnes à la une*, which means *Headlines*. This was a time when not everyone had television sets, and they would do things on the Algerian War that were very scandalous, in which they would reveal that there was torture, all kinds of things. Everybody had to see that program.

What happened was that I wanted to do a film on the Liston-Patterson fight. I thought that would make a terrific subject, of how Americans are polarized around this fight with the notion of good and evil. So I went to these people in television, and I said, "I'd like to do this film." They tried to get permission but it was too late. The fight was already all booked up for the press. So they said, "Well, look, you've been doing fashion photographs, why don't you do a film on the collections in Paris. And so I did a film, with five different scenes, a famous model and a famous photographer, that was Avedon and Susie Parker; and then the business side, the buyers; and a couturier who was coming up, and that was Saint-Laurent, his first collection; and then also the editors. So I did this film on the collections for *Cinq colonnes à la une*. Then they asked me to do a couple other films.

They asked me, for example, to do a film on the referendums that de Gaulle was making, on the idea of universal suffrage. Everybody was asking themselves, is this a good idea or not? Too many morons around! So I did a film where I went to a small village, to a large town, and to Paris, to see what people thought about voting. Most everyone said, "These fuckers, they come around for their vote and we never see them again." It was a very negative view of what the French thought of the people they voted for.

This was a monthly program, and they decided I would do the whole two hours. It was usually cut into fifteen- or twenty-minute sections. I really worked my ass off on this film, and I was excited about it. Then, on the Friday that it was supposed to be shown, at 5:30, they invited the Minister of Information and other government representatives, the people who decide, and when the film was over they said, "You think we're going to let you put that film—cause it was very negative about the electoral process—in the living rooms of the people?"

Cineaste: *This is at the last minute?*

Klein: Fucking last minute! 5:30, and the film is supposed to be shown at 8:30. And they saw two hours, so that was 7:30, and they called it off! Nobody thought it would be censored, but it was totally censored. I had thought that working with French television would be kind of amusing, I would learn a whole lot of things. I learned how they worked, and that was part of the scenario of my first film, *Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?*

I wasn't really interested in getting into the movie scene, because I saw how they worked. People like Alain Resnais, he's doing a film right now. He has another guy working on the scenario for the next film, and another guy working on the thing after that, night and day, twenty-four hours. I had stopped photography to do movies, and when I was doing movies I thought, well, maybe there are also other things to do. I wasn't really a movie-buff—people like Scorsese, who think only about films. Also, when I was working with Léger—although Léger was a myth, and it was so great to meet him—it was school, the idea of twenty students sitting around a still life, with our easels, trying to do Léger but not Léger! It was kind of a drag, and I wanted to get away from that. I mean, the first thing everyone wants to do is kill their fathers, and Léger was kind of a father to me.

Anyway, once I got to do a couple films, I started getting involved in militant movies. After *Mr. Freedom*, I was invited by the Algerians to do a film on the Pan-African Cultural Festival.

Cineaste: *Why did they invite you, do you know?*

Klein: Because my films were a big success in Algiers. *Muhammad Ali* stayed six months in three movie houses in Algiers, and they knew that I was kind of instrumental in a lot of the making of *Far from Vietnam*. And they wanted to do a thing like *Far from Vietnam*, invite directors from all over the world, and make a film about the Pan-African Festival, where they invited all the African countries to come and show what their culture was about. I accepted right away, I thought it was exciting. What I didn't know was that the Algerians were hated by the Cubans and by the Africans. Ousmane Sembene, for example, would not work with the Algerians; the Cubans said fuck the Algerians, because the Algerians were very rich, they had oil, they had gas. And the people in Poland, in Lodz, and all these people, they said, Fuck the Algerians!

Cineaste: *Were you the only one to materialize?*

Klein: When the Algerians contacted me, they said, "Look, why don't you do this film with a bunch of

directors, and you can coordinate everything." I said, "Why don't the Algerians do it?" They said, "Well, we did a film on Algerian folklore last year, we shot like 100,000 feet of film, but we couldn't make a film out of it, because all these guys were amateurs mostly, and we're not going to be able to do something that shows that we're great producers, we want professionals." So when I learned that we wouldn't be getting these directors from Cuba and Africa and so on, I was stuck with it. So I had the idea of getting directors who were also cameramen—Pierre Lhomme, Yann Le Masson, Michel Brault from Canada, and guys like that, who are directors and cameramen. Since it wasn't going to be a fiction film, and there were things going on all over Algiers night and day, we needed a lot of crews, and I thought the best thing would be to have people who can think for themselves, who know what to film and how to film it. So that's what we did.

Cineaste: *What is the relationship between that film and the Eldridge Cleaver film? They were shot at the same time?*

Klein: Cleaver was there. The Algerians invited and had made it possible for the liberation movements in Africa to have an office in Algiers financed by the Algerians. So the liberation movements of Mozambique, of South Africa, of Guinea Bissau and so on, had offices in Algiers. They also invited a famous American liberation movement, which was the Black Panthers. [laughs] Cleaver had jumped bail in San Francisco, he'd killed somebody, or he didn't, I don't know. But he had to get out of America. So the Algerians took him in, set him up, gave him a car, and an apartment, but he was a pain all the time, because he was an American—he wanted a better car, a better apartment. [laughs]



John Abbey as Mr. Freedom

Cineaste: *So what was your relationship with him like?*

Klein: Do you remember the magazine called *Ramparts*? It was a West Coast leftist magazine published in the late Sixties by Bob Scheer. He was there with Cleaver, because he got Cleaver to run for President in 1968 on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket. Anyway, Cleaver was there in Algiers with a revolutionary film crew. Now these guys were tripping over their wires and filming the ceiling. Cleaver noticed that they didn't know what they were doing, and he saw us, very well-organized, coordinating all these crews. Bob Scheer said, "When you're finished with the shooting of the Pan-African Festival, would you work with Cleaver and me?" So I said, great, and the Algerians were all ready to finance it. I kept a couple of technicians from the big shoot, and we holed up in a hotel, and filmed for three days and three nights, nonstop.

Cineaste: *It's an interesting film because it gives Cleaver a platform, but you also challenge him.*

Klein: I censored him also, because he would say things like, "Hey man, what are you doing with a camera, why don't you have a gun?" I'd say, "I don't work with guns, I work with cameras." And my wife was there, my editor was there... Scheer said to Cleaver, "You know, you're fooling around with this gun all the time, I mean, people who are serious don't play around with guns like that." Cleaver said, "Well, it's not loaded." Scheer said, "Oh, that's famous last words, you know." And Cleaver said, "I know there's nothing in the chamber, and I'll prove it." And he put the gun to his temple and said, "I'm going to pull the trigger." Everybody plunged under the bed, scared to death, cause he's a fucking madman! Scheer and I said, "Look, you don't have to prove this, forget it." "No, no, I'll show you," he insisted, "I'll pull the trigger."

So I filmed all this, and he pulled the trigger, but I said, "You know, I'm not gonna put that in the film, I'm telling you, because you're gonna be really unbelievable for the public as a serious leader." Scheer would say to him, "If Lenin had the chance to explain what he wanted to do in Russia, and he did things like that, nobody would take him seriously." Cleaver would answer, "Well, fuck Lenin! I'm talking to the brother on the street, and he'll understand. I don't give a shit about these intellectual Marxists and so on." I have that bit, and I've never put it in the film.

Cineaste: *It's interesting that you left that out, while you leave certain things in. At one point, he's talking about the Vietnamese, and he says that he admires that they don't talk about fighting, they just fight. You*

challenge him, saying, isn't that a contradiction, because you constantly talk about fighting. So you leave in some criticisms as well.

Klein: Of course, because we weren't doing a campaign film.

Cineaste: You also interviewed Malcolm X, for the Muhammad Ali film.

Klein: Well, I got to do the film the way I wanted to because, when I went down to Miami from New York, there was an empty seat on the plane, and Malcolm X was sitting there. Nobody wanted to sit next to Malcolm X, he was on the cover of Life, everybody thought he was a big Boogie Man. I said, "Is this seat free?," and he said, "Yeah, sit down." So we went from New York to Miami, like two-and-a-half hours, talking nonstop, and we really became friends.

Cineaste: What year was this?

Klein: This was in 1964, when Ali fought Liston in Miami. The reason I was able to immediately get close to Ali was because Malcolm spread the word that I was alright. Everybody knew that I knew Malcolm, so when I arrived there, there was not one minute of hesitation. I could do anything I wanted. It's not that Ali embraces people with open arms, but I was OK.

Cineaste: Were you in touch with Malcolm X until shortly before his assassination?

Klein: I met him on the plane, as I said, and then when I came back from Boston, I called him up, and we filmed Malcolm in his house. He was killed ten days later. But I could've become friendly with Malcolm because he was a very reasonable, funny, intelligent man.

Cineaste: But you were already set to film Ali when you met Malcolm X?

Klein: Well, I said I wanted to do a film on the polarization of good and evil in America around a heavyweight championship fight. I wanted to do Patterson, but it didn't work out. Then I was going to do Cassius Clay. He was like a clown for the white press, nobody took him seriously—he would say, "I'm the Greatest, I'm the Greatest!" It was only later, when he said he was a Black Muslim, once he became a threat, that people started being really mean and scared about him, and taking him seriously. In the film, Malcolm says, "If Cassius wins, there will be all these Negroes"—he used the word Negroes at that time—"all these Negroes walking around the streets saying, 'I'm the Greatest,' and this is something that white America can't stand."

Cineaste: But did you know of Cassius Clay already?

Klein: No. How did I know him? I was living in Paris, and Cassius Clay hadn't been in many fights. Everybody was convinced that these fights were fixed, and that he was no good. I mean, he was dancing around, he didn't have a punch. People were thinking about Joe Lewis, or Rocky Marciano, guys who could destroy people. Ali never destroyed anybody. I got to know him and the people around him, and Angelo Dundee explained to me that Ali wouldn't have to hit hard, but he'd hit so many times, that the guy would be in a daze, and then, boom, he could take him out.

The first time I realized that Ali could win against Liston was when there was a scene outside Liston's camp, and Ali makes believe he wants Liston to come out and fight. He's making a ruckus, and I realized that getting hold of Ali was like getting hold of a horse. He was much bigger than me, and bigger than Liston, and you couldn't get hold of him. I said, Jesus, this guy weighs over 200 pounds, and anybody who weighs over 200 pounds can make a hole in the wall if he hits it. I began to see that he had a chance.

So at first I didn't realize that I had stumbled on a legend. Who could imagine that Cassius "Big Mouth" Clay was going to be considered by the whole sports establishment of America as the major sports figure of the century?

Cineaste: How quickly did you realize how important he was going to become?

Klein: I realized the next day, when Ali first started to talk seriously. He was saying that he was changing his name, "My name is now Muhammad Ali." People asked, "Are you for integration?," and he said, "No, I'm not." He would say incredible things like, "I'm not going to go to some school, with the police around, I might get killed!" Very normal sort of talk, no bullshit.

What knocked me out the night of the fight was that he was heavyweight champion of the world, it was

1964—today, there would be 200 journalists and TV people with their satellite dishes outside of his house—but there was nobody! He expected sudden acclaim, and that's why he said, "Let's get in the bus and go to the black neighborhood of Miami." You know, it was strange to see that he had to go on his bus to the black neighborhoods, to get acclaim. Also he was thinking of me, to get something on film. About that time, I started to realize that this was something else. The return match was supposed to be in Boston, and I saw the way his white owners were scared of him. They realized they'd bought a sort of Frankenstein monster who was escaping them. One of the guys who ran the syndicate, said, [mimicking a Southern accent] "I do feel he's a little ungrateful."

Cineaste: *Did these films get you in trouble in the U.S. at all, especially the Eldridge Cleaver film? That must have gotten some attention.*

Klein: *Eldridge Cleaver* opened in New York at the Cinema 1 and Cinema 2 theaters on Third Avenue. A very smart distributor named Donald Rugoff had all the good films from Europe. He bought it and showed it. But he realized that he had to do something, so he established "Revolutionary Prices." The Black Panthers were to get fifty per cent. For the first couple of weeks it made a lot of money. He dropped the ticket prices, so instead of \$2.50 or whatever it was at the time, it was \$1. He wanted to make a revolutionary statement. Screenings were full, so he arranged extra showings, and it was shown from 12:00 noon to midnight. So the Panthers figured it out, you know—21,000 people came in during the week, so they wanted their \$10,050. Rugoff explained, "No, it doesn't work that way. I have to pay for advertising, I have to pay the employees, and that comes off the top." So the Panthers were pissed off, and they said, "No, we get fifty per cent." He said, "No, the contract was fifty per cent of net." They didn't realize all that.

Cineaste: They were supposed to get fifty per cent as, basically, producers of the film?

Klein: Yeah, it was their film, you know. Rugoff made a deal that the Panthers would promote the film and so on, but they promoted the film so much that he was afraid to go in the movie house! The Panthers would sit in the lobby and sell their magazines and records. The funny thing is that at that time Nelson Rockefeller, the then-Governor of New York, was trying the Panther 21, and at the same time he was on the Board of Directors of Cinema 1-Cinema 2, where they were showing the film on Eldridge Cleaver—it was really a contradiction!

Cineaste: *I wanted to ask about the May '68 film, Les Grands soirs et petites matins.*

Klein: I had a lot of fun doing that. May '68 was really a gas. Everything was turned upside down.



The Model Couple

Cineaste: *And you were there, right from the start.*

Klein: I lived in the Latin Quarter. You ask me how these films get done—they're almost always accidental. The cinema went on strike in May '68, and we went down to the suburbs somewhere, and everybody's talking about how to organize a revolutionary cinema set-up—distribution, production, the whole thing. They would talk about the revolutionary models in Cuba, in Poland, and everything. They would talk and talk all night long, all day long. I was getting sick of that, because I lived in the Latin Quarter. I would leave my neighborhood and go out to the fucking suburbs, and these guys would talk and talk and talk, and there were a couple of prima donnas who would be conducting the discussion. One day I was completely fed up, I was out in the hallway smoking a cigarette, and a bunch of students from the Sorbonne came by and said, "Listen, we're sick of having all these camera crews come to the Sorbonne and say, 'We're Dutch or Norwegian television,' we don't know whether they're cops or not, so we want to have Cinema Sorbonne. Who would be willing to be Cinema Sorbonne?" I was standing there and I said, "I'll do it." They said, "Who are you?" I told them, and they said, "Oh, listen, that'd be great!" So the next day I had two or three guys helping me, my wife was there, and we filmed everything that was going on that was good. It wasn't always easy because people were kind of suspicious. I had a badge that said "Cinema Sorbonne." But the next day a

lot of people had suddenly made their own badges, so we had to change them. You know, there was so much bullshit.

Cineaste: *Why did it take ten years for the film to appear?*

Klein: I had a friend who had a factory, and he was all for May '68. He financed the editing, and I edited it right away. But it came out in 1978 because the idea during May '68 was that everybody—the Trotskyists, the anarchists, the communists, the trade unionists—would each do their film, and we were going to put all these films together. During May '68 there was this great generosity, but later everybody held on to their films. Ten years later—the French work on metric anniversaries—some were shown on TV, and somebody had two movie houses and decided to show the films. He asked everybody, will you show your films? People had mellowed, and decided to be buddies. We showed the films in these two movie houses and they were packed.

Cineaste: *Grand soirs, Muhammad Ali, and Eldridge Cleaver feel more closely related to the photography you did on the streets of New York and elsewhere, while Mr. Freedom and the other fictional films are a very different kind of animal, much more stylized. Did you see these as different strands, or do they have affinities that are not so obvious?*

Klein: I like documentaries. A documentary, no matter what, is something that you can set up rather fast. To shoot *Muhammad Ali* in America, I went over with the sound man and my assistants, and that was it, no big production. But doing a film like *Mr. Freedom* is a big job, including getting all those costumes. We didn't have that much money. When making sets, for example, I used an abandoned gas factory for the Freedom Center, and painted all their machines red, white, and blue. It was a long production.

Cineaste: *But were these two different kinds of filmmaking satisfying in different ways?*

Klein: For me they were satisfying—making films, doing books, taking photographs, painting...

Cineaste: *What was the genesis of The Model Couple?*

Klein: That was a film that came before reality TV shows. I had the idea to put this couple in an experimental apartment. Actually, that was a fall-back, plan B. I wanted to do a film on what they call a new city. They had a couple in America, but in France it was all the rage. De Gaulle was a madman, and he was talking about the idea of building cities out of nothing. I wanted to show how that worked, and how much bullshit that was, because you can't make a city. A city takes hundreds of years, it was a phony proposition. I wanted to do a film like *Boom Town*, with Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy—they were in Texas, and everybody came for the oil and there was a boom town, with gangsters, a saloon, everything. I wanted to do a film on making a new city, with steel and oil and the port and everything. It would be like the far West, and in the middle of this imaginary town that was just made out of nothing there would be bounty hunters, whores, people out of work, every stratum. In those days, you know, there were urban movements, people would plan to put a highway through a city and there would be all kinds of resistance. I had the idea of making it more international by having an American architect, an urbanist, who would come to France because he has a reputation for working on these new cities. I had Elliot Gould—this was a time when he was kind of popular, he was on the cover of *Time*—and he was a typical American.

Cineaste: *So how far did that project go?*

Klein: At the last minute, Gaumont backed out. It was a big film, and I had, in the middle of the boom town, a model apartment with a model couple. So I just had money to do that part.

Cineaste: *What was your political background—were you politicized early on?*

Klein: I was a complete anarchist. I couldn't stand any kind of political party, on the left or elsewhere. So I was really open to anything—the Muslims, the Black Panthers, and so on. I mean, I took them as illustrations of what was going on in America. I wasn't a Black Muslim, I wasn't a Black Panther.

A lot of people say to me, "Why don't you live in America?," and I say, "If I lived in America, I'd be dead by now." If I saw Cheney and Bush on TV, and Nixon and Westmoreland and all these people, I'd have a heart attack every morning. I can't stand that sort of shit!

Cineaste: *It's right out of Mr. Freedom.*

Klein: It's exactly what's happening.

Cineaste: Especially the rhetoric about freedom. The satire in the film is barely an exaggeration. How does it feel to look at this movie that you made thirty years ago and realize...

Klein: I fuckin' laugh. I see Freedom saying, "Everything I destroyed I'll build up better than before, God Bless You."

Cineaste: It's a very angry film.

Klein: Yeah, people thought I was Manichaeian, that's the word that everybody would use—good and bad, no in-between. Well that's the way I think. Bush—can you say anything good about him? What can you say?

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