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WSJ. MAGAZINE | CULTURE

## A New Book Brings Yves Klein's Parisian Apartment to Life

'Yves Klein: In/Out Studio' captures the apartment, preserved by Klein's widow for over five decades, where the French artist lived, worked and died



HOME BASE | Editions of Klein's eight cube-shaped Untitled Sculptures (S 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8) (1957) and his branchlike Untitled Sculpture (S 11) (1960) as well as a pigment-lined table built from a patented Klein design fill his Paris apartment. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By CAROL KINO

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**THINK OF THE FRENCH** artist Yves Klein, and the mind first leaps to International Klein Blue, or IKB, the intense ultramarine and resin mixture he dreamed up in 1956 and patented in 1960.

Next come his Anthropometries, the collaborative body prints he began making a few years before his untimely death in 1962, at age 34. To create one, a model transformed herself into what Klein called a "living brush," sponging her naked body with blue paint, then pressing herself against white paper or fabric. A forerunner of performance art,

these events sometimes took place before a public audience with the charismatic Klein, garbed in a dinner jacket and white tie, conducting the proceedings like a chef d'orchestre, the whole scene documented by a photographer. (The prints themselves have become iconic, with body silhouettes featuring on two dresses from Céline's spring 2017 line.)



BODY OF WORK | A model making an Anthropometry print at the apartment in 1960. PHOTO: © YVES KLEIN, ARS, NEW YORK, 2017

But more often, Klein worked on his Anthropometries at home, in the Paris apartment that he shared with the East German artist Rotraut Uecker, his equally charismatic partner. Although Rotraut, the name she works under today, never modeled for him publicly—“Yves never wanted that,” she says—she was there at the apartment on the momentous day in 1960 when he first used the technique to create body prints. The experience of making Anthropometries, she says, “was this spiritual thing, that you could see yourself not only in the mirror, but also in the print.”

Because their work space was an apartment living room, not a studio —“We were always looking for one, but we didn't get one,” Rotraut says—they had to treat it carefully, rolling up the rug and laying paper over the parquet. Mozart or Beethoven went on the gramophone and work began.

For going on 55 years, Rotraut, now 78, has maintained that space much as it was when Klein died. And a new monograph by German art critic Matthias Koddenberg, *Yves Klein: In/Out Studio* (Verlag Kettler), which features nearly 300 archival photographs, many never before published, shows how the artist lived and worked there and

elsewhere. The book's snapshots and outtakes reveal the mess and mischief behind the scenes, as Klein slathered paint on the models, sat exhausted on the bed or laughed over meals with friends. "Klein always posed and told photographers how to photograph him," says Koddenberg. "So it's nice to have shots that show him really working."

Before moving in, Klein painted the walls, doors and even the fireplace white, abjuring all living room furnishings other than a couch and a thick gray rug. "It was like *The Void*," says Rotraut, referring to the exhibition Klein mounted around that time at Galerie Iris Clert, in which he famously displayed an empty gallery as an artwork.



Arman's *Homage to Yves Klein* (1992) now stands in one corner; Rotraut's *Kite Paintings* (2014) are mounted in the hall. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Just as the gallery overflowed with spectators, their home filled with friends: critics like Pierre Restany, Klein's longtime supporter; artists from the Impasse Ronsin, a nearby rabbit's warren of studios, including Larry Rivers, Niki de Saint Phalle and Klein's sometime collaborator Jean Tinguely; and other Nouveaux Réalistes—France's answer to American pop artists—who signed their first manifesto in the apartment. "We were all very young," says the artist Christo. "We were almost like a family." A political refugee from Bulgaria who could barely speak French, Christo dropped by whenever possible, hoping to meet collectors who would buy his work or dealers who would advance his career.

Rotraut frequently cooked. "We always sat on the floor, Japanese-style, surrounded by Yves's work," recalls Virginia Dwan, the dealer who first showed Klein's work in Los Angeles. An enormous wooden

platter served as a table, and Klein, who was also developing ideas for an “architecture of the air,” involving pneumatic structures, always spoke of one day making both guests and table levitate.

Klein realized many of his greatest projects, which prefigured conceptualism and installation and environmental art, during his time living in the apartment, including the 1960 photograph *Leap into the Void*, in which he appears to jump from a window into the sky. He made other work there, too, including his famous Monochromes, each featuring a single pure color, most often IKB; his gold-leaf Monogolds; and sculptures covered in blue pigment, such as the *Relief-Portrait of Arman*, an edition of which still hangs in the apartment.



An edition of Klein's Relief-Portrait of Arman (PR 1) (1962) hangs on the wall. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Klein, whose parents were both well-established painters, claimed to have made his first grand creative gesture at 19, in 1947, while lying on the beach in Nice with two friends he'd met at judo school. On a whim, they divided up the universe among them, with the poet Claude Pascal taking the air, the sculptor Arman taking the earth and Klein taking the sky. He later called it “my greatest and most beautiful work.”

Soon after, Klein created his first artwork, for chamber orchestra, the *Symphonie Monotone-Silence*: a single note played for 20 minutes, followed by 20 minutes of silence. (The piece still resonates today. This January, art dealers Dominique Lévy and Brett Gorvy arranged a performance at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.) Then he began traveling the world, working for a London frame-maker, which gave him the idea of making monochromes with pure pigment and gold

leaf, and studying judo, most notably in Japan. (He eventually earned a fourth-degree black belt.) In 1955, after returning to Paris, Klein opened his own judo school, a simple space hung with his Monochromes.

Klein officially showed those seminal works for the first time in Paris later that year. By 1957, having formulated IKB, he had become a star, with shows in Milan, London and Düsseldorf, Germany, and twin Paris exhibitions, one featuring an empty room, the other a sculpture consisting of 1,001 blue balloons released into the sky.



PERSONAL SPACE | Klein and Rotraut at home in 1962, shortly before his death. PHOTO: © YVES KLEIN, ARS, NEW YORK, 2017

That summer, Klein met Rotraut, an East German émigré nearly 11 years his junior, in Nice. The younger sister of the artist Gunther Uecker, she'd grown up on a farm during the war, exploring the land and making art, guided largely by intuition. She was employed as an au pair by Arman and his wife, and she already knew—and loved—Klein's blue paintings. "I assumed he was a wise, old man with a little beard, maybe a yogi," Rotraut says. Instead, he turned out to be "this young man, all excited seeing me, like sunshine, with a big energy field all around him." It was kismet.

Rotraut left Nice to assist Klein on a major commission, a facade of huge blue sponges for Germany's Gelsenkirchen opera house. He pushed her to pursue art seriously, and they soon moved in together in Paris.

In 1961, the couple visited Los Angeles, where Klein was showing at Dwan's gallery. The Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had just orbited Earth, adding new meaning to Klein's focus on the sky. "You always had the feeling that Klein was involved with something bigger and greater than we were consciously dealing with," Dwan recalls. And now his work "gave you the sense of space and life and death." (Examples appear in *Los Angeles to New York: Dwan Gallery, 1959–1971*, a traveling show originating at the National Gallery of Art and next opening March 19 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.)



A detail from Klein's Relief-Portrait of Arman (PR 1) (1962). PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

On that trip, while visiting Disneyland, Klein bought Rotraut a ring at a gift shop and made their engagement official. They married in January 1962, in an elaborate ceremony in a gothic Parisian church, with Rotraut already pregnant. But in May, at the Cannes Film Festival, after seeing a sensationalized depiction of his Anthropometries in the film *Mondo Cane*, Klein had the first of three heart attacks. He suffered the third in early June and died in the apartment.

Rotraut says she had some warning: After exhibiting *The Void*, Klein had told her that “he thought the price to pay was that he should totally go.” Still, his death was a massive shock. She kept him lying in state at home for four days, so friends could pay their respects and she could “realize that he was really dead,” she says. “At night, I felt he still had his arms around me.” Their son, Yves Amu, was born in August.

Six years later, Rotraut remarried. Her husband, Daniel Moquay, turned his attention to managing Klein's estate, building Klein into such a seminal figure that the artist's work is always on view somewhere—the Tate Liverpool is currently running a retrospective through March 5. Rotraut had three more children and now spends most of the year making art—sculptures of dancing figures and paintings of the cosmos and starry skies—in Phoenix. When in Paris, she continues to work in another wing of the apartment, which she has since expanded.

But the central space remains untouched. “I thought it should always stay,” Rotraut says. “You feel the richness of creation, of all the events and all the tremendous art he made here.”

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