

A. Kertész, photographer

Introductory essay by John Szarkowski

Author

Kertész, André

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ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

Photographer



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ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

André, the second of three surviving sons of Leopold and Ernestine Kertész, was born on July 2, 1894, in Budapest. The years of his childhood were good ones: middle-aged men remembered only small wars, and progress seemed both inevitable and desirable. His father was a lover of books and a bookseller. His lack of success as the latter—and indeed in a variety of other businesses—did not spoil his family's sense of the pleasure of life nor interrupt his own immersion in the classics of Magyar literature.

The middle son was an indifferent student and an accomplished truant. He loved to go to his relatives in the country, where he could explore the landscape and visit the peasants and their animals and his friends the gypsies. In the city the friends of his choice were art students, and his own values were artist's values. When at the age of twelve he ran away from home for two days (not in anger but with the joy of an explorer) he took with him, besides the coins in his pocket, only books and a flute.

When he was fifteen his father died, and an uncle, a member of the Budapest Stock Exchange, became his guardian. In 1912 André received his baccalaureate from the Academy of Commerce, and took a job in the Bourse. With his first savings he bought a camera and began to use it.

What the young Kertész liked best was to see new places and new things. In 1914 he was drafted into the Hungarian Army, and by 1918 he had seen Austria, Galicia, Albania and Rumania, and most of the rest of central Europe. He had also been shot at (in fact he had been shot—within an inch of his heart), and had for a year been partially paralyzed; he had been hospitalized with typhoid, and had returned to find his regiment captured by the Russians. But he had also photographed—in his own way—much of what he had seen, shooting pictures that the official photographers did not recognize as pictures. And he had seen almost all of these negatives destroyed during the revolution of 1918.

Kertész had in short suffered the incredible indignities of war, and had been impressed by its prodigality. Afterwards the routine of the Exchange seemed even less satisfying. But he bowed, for the moment, to the wishes of his family, who did not recognize photography as a respectable calling. It took Kertész six more years to demonstrate beyond



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Boy Sleeping, Budapest, 1912

doubt that he was not a financier, nor a businessman, nor a farmer; in the meantime he explored photography and the city and the people as best he could as an amateur. He was encouraged by occasional publication in Hungarian magazines, and in 1922 one of his pictures was awarded an honor diploma by the Hungarian Amateur Photographers' Association. Kertész was told that the Jury would award him the more coveted silver medal if he would print the picture in the bromoil technique—a process then in vogue which made a photograph look somewhat like an aquatint. He replied that bromoil was imitation graphics, and that he, a photographer, would settle for the diploma.

By 1925 Kertész had convinced his family that his life must be in photography, and he left for Paris, capital of the artists' world. He arrived with a little money and no plan except to express all that he saw and felt through his camera.

When Kertész left Hungary he had no formal art training. Years later he could remember the childhood hours he had spent in his uncle's attic among high piles of old German and Hungarian illustrated magazines—*Gartenlaube*, *Fliegende Blätter* and others. But the work of his great photographic contemporaries and predecessors was then unknown to him. He had not heard of Stieglitz, or Strand, or Moholy-Nagy, or Man Ray; Cartier-Bresson would not make his start in photography until four years later.

Yet in its essentials the style of Kertész was already forming. It was characterized above all by an eye for the importance of the trivial. It showed a taste for the slightly strange: distortion saved from the macabre by its sweet good humor. It showed a love of flat pattern and spatial ambiguity. And beyond this, Kertész had an intuitive understanding of the realism of the camera—of its ability to imprison the telling detail, the convincing texture, the climactic moment. It seems now to Kertész that even while he saved for his first camera he knew what photography was.

His room in Paris was an artist's room, high above the chimneypots of Montparnasse. Immediately he began to work, shooting for himself, discovering his own Paris. His friends were artists and journalists, and soon he was a member of the family of the cafés. At first he supplemented his savings by selling original prints of his best pictures—beautifully printed miniatures, approximating three by four inches—for twenty-five francs each to visiting friends of journalists at the Dôme. Soon he was doing press photography for leading European newspapers. He attracted attention by virtue of his unconventional method

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in covering assignments. "While other press cameramen bunched together, Kertész loitered on the sidelines filming the significant background of world-shaking events." (*Minicam*, Arthur Browning, August, 1939.) Kertész also sold work to *Kölnische Illustrierte*, the first of the pioneering German picture magazines, and to other journals that followed.

From the first Kertész was committed to the small camera. He did not care much about maximum sharpness in the image. To him photography did not mean the precise and subtle revelation of the surfaces of things; it meant capturing the essence of a situation. In his early Paris days he worked with a Goertz Tenax, using tiny 4.5 x 6 cm. glass plates. His fellow professionals scorned this camera and called it a toy until Kertész demonstrated the freedom it allowed him. In 1928 he bought one of the first Leicas in Paris. This revolutionary camera seemed to have been designed for his needs—it was discreet, flexible, and instantly responsive. Kertész quickly made it his own.

In March 1927 Jan Slivinsky gave Kertész a one-man exhibition in his *Sacre du Printemps* gallery. (The show followed an exhibition of paintings by the ubiquitous Kiki, model and mistress of modern artists.) At the opening Slivinsky played the piano and Paul Dermée and others read poetry *d'esprit nouveau* in French, Hungarian, English, and Dutch, including a poem written for Kertész by Dermée himself (see page 10).

The exhibition was warmly reviewed, and Kertész now found himself not only an artist among equals but a personage. In the following year he was shown at the important First Independent Salon of Photography. The exhibition was by invitation, and on the selection committee were Lucien Vogel, René Clair, Florent Fels, Jean Provost, and G. Charensol. Eugène Atget was exhibited here for the first time. Others were: Berenice Abbott, d'Ora, Albin-Guillot, Hoyningen-Huene, Germaine Krull, Nadar, Paul Outerbridge, and Man Ray.

French critics now took up photography with enthusiasm and groped for a vocabulary to explain the new pictures. Kertész was compared to



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2
Kertész at Front (photographer unknown), 1915

3
Poland, 1915

4
Ernestine Kertész with sons Imre and Jenő (left and right) and nephew.
Sziget-Becse, Hungary, c. 1921

5
Gypsy Children, Esztergom, Hungary, 1917



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Courbet, to Utrillo, to Hokusai, to Holbein. In much of this writing a heavy veil of poetic imagery reveals how difficult the critics found the ideas that photography presented. They agreed that it was not skill of hand that made a photograph, nor the imaginative manipulation or construction of motif, nor yet the physical beauty of the photographic print itself. Then what was it? The answer was perhaps too simple: the photographer selected certain fragmentary images from life, recorded them as concisely as his craft and sensibility allowed, and showed them to the world with an implied challenge: that the selected fact was an important one. It was the observation itself—the places and moments, and happenings with which the photographer surrounded himself and with which he identified himself—that made up his own new world.

These years saw the beginning of the photographic picture magazine. The Germans had started in the mid-twenties; now the French followed, and photographers had an entirely new market for their work. Some would argue that from the photographer's point of view these first years were the best. The editors of that time were inclined to regard the photographer's work as a finished product, not as the raw material to be used in developing a story. Basic editing was done by the photographer himself, who would deliver those photographs which seemed to him to tell the story. On the average, Kertész recalls, if ten pictures were submitted, eight would be used. Photographer and writer were as a rule independent reporters working parallel to each other; the editor respected the integrity and the identity of each.

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Lucien Vogel, planning his great journal, *Vu*, had seen the Kertész exhibition of 1927. He sought out the photographer and asked that he shoot whatever he wanted and as much as he wanted for the new magazine. In the following years Kertész was a major contributor not only to *Vu* but to *Art et Médecine*, *Uhu*, *Variétés*, and to the short-lived but vital *Bifur*. His work, perhaps more than that of any other photographer, defined the direction in which modern European photography developed. Cartier-Bresson and Brassai are among those who have publicly acknowledged their debt to the pioneering vision of their predecessor. Writing in *Minicam* in 1944, Maria Giovanna Eisner remembered the opening of an exhibition in Paris ten years earlier which showed the work of ten leading European photographers including Kertész: "...André Kertész," she said "was not just another colleague for the younger generation of French photographers. He was respected and admired, with almost the veneration which youth is supposed to have for old age. Yet Kertész at the time of this exhibition, 1934, was

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just forty." She quotes Pierre Bouchet, another of the ten exhibited, as saying: "Not one of the ten of us here is fit to hold a candle to him." Kertész was successful, prosperous, and admired. But what he still liked most was to see new places and new things. In 1936 he agreed to make a two-year visit to the United States, to photograph—he thought in his own style—for a New York commercial studio. The decision so casually made proved a momentous one for Kertész. Before the two years were up, the approach of war made return to France impossible for the Hungarian national, and his stay became permanent.

It is necessary to say that this development had a disastrous effect on Kertész' career as an artist. In the twenty-five years that followed, Kertész devoted himself primarily to work which might have been adequately executed by a score of talented mechanics. Swallowed by a commercial world which he could neither escape nor master, Kertész made tasteful records of fashionable interiors, undistinguished fashion shots, competent and insignificant still lifes for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town and Country*, *House and Garden*. His significant pictures of the period were those occasional photographs made for his own enjoyment during a momentary break on assignment, or away from work. In these pictures the sympathy, the poetry, the humor, the bittersweet sense of the strangeness of things, are as strong and as compelling as ever; but these photographs are fragments, isolated sketches for a priceless document which was never made.

One of the inventors of photo-journalism, Kertész did not work at this craft in America. The days of improvisation, the days when an editor would ask a photographer to shoot what he wanted, were almost over. *Life* magazine was begun in 1936; in its first issue it promised a new kind of photography, based on "the mind-directed camera." The promise was fulfilled, but the mind that directed the camera was no longer the photographer's. Reporter, researcher, cameraman, and writer grad-

6
Self-portrait, Paris, 1927

7
Studio Party (Kertész Lower Left), Paris, 1927

8
Ersi Model, Sketch of Kertész, 1927

9
Kertész and Future Wife Elizabeth, Paris, 1933

10
Study with Elizabeth



8



9



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ually became members of a team, and none of them had a decisive role in defining the story. Kertész was told by one *Life* editor that he "talked too much with his pictures."

In 1939 Alexander King, then a *Life* editor, discussed the problem in an article in *Minicam* entitled "Are Editors Vandals?" He said in part: "Kertész, one of the inventors of the photo-reportage technique . . . has never been able to place any of this thoughtful and serious work with any American publication. . . . I am convinced that, for the moment at least, there is no market for some of the best work of [the intelligent photographer]. . . . Editors believe that the public is not interested in such pictures."

The time and the conditions were not propitious. Still, might not an artist like Kertész prevail over the system, create his own opportunities, slowly bend the situation to his own advantage? If conditions in this country were difficult for the creative photographer in 1936, it is also true that Kertész, in his American career, neither changed these conditions nor worked productively within their limitations.

If this was failure, it was in keeping with the talents and the character of this artist. The photographer who might have bent the market to his own desire or used it for his own ends would have been one capable of repeating and refining his successes—one in whom intellect and calculation might discipline invention, one capable of judicious self-editing.

Kertész is a different kind of man. His very versatility, the variety of the experience that has charmed him, his unquestioning acceptance of life, have produced an art which is centrifugal, unpredictable, and romantic. In 1945 an editor who admired and had already published Kertész' work closed a difficult letter acknowledging the receipt of a commissioned portfolio with the words: "So, Mr. Kertész, I return these pictures to you, and I don't know what to say. Believe me, I wish to avoid no obligation I made, I think it was clear you were to take some pictures for us and we were to pay you a given amount whether we used them or not. . . . If you have the time, please, I would like to talk to you about these pictures because I feel if you took the pictures they must be good, and if I can't see value in them it is just lack of seeing on my part."

Almost twenty years earlier Paul Dérmee had said: "His child's eyes see each thing for the first time," and this was still true. He could not in his serious work supply the expected, for what he had seen before was not what he would see now.

As the years went on his niche in the world of magazine illustration became progressively constricting and unsatisfactory. By 1960 Kertész was again finding time to make his own kind of picture, and in 1962, after an illness which provided an opportunity for contemplation, he cut all ties to the markets that he had served for twenty-five years, and returned to what he knew was his own work.

These most recent pictures seem in their freshness to be the work of a greatly gifted beginner discovering for the first time the beauty of photography. But in their economy and ease, in their abandonment to the uncomplicated pleasure of seeing, they are the work of a master.

The photographic world has begun to realize again that in much of what it values it is the heir of André Kertész. Fortunately this rediscovery has come while Kertész is still working, still seeking to express all that he sees and feels, and while his colleagues can not only be grateful for his past but look forward to his future.

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Kertész on Assignment, Winnetka, Ill., 1952

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Kertész, by Dan Budnik, 1964

13

Kertész Working, by Dan Budnik, 1964

13



KERTÉSZ

Paul Dermée, 1927

Translated by Jill Anson

his child's eyes see each thing for the first time;
they see a great king naked when he is dressed in lies;
they are frightened by the canvas-shrouded phantoms
 who haunt the banks of the Seine;

innocently they delight in new pictures made by
three sunlit chairs in the Luxembourg Gardens,
Mondrian's door opening onto a staircase,
Eyeglasses tossed near a pipe on a table.

there is no method, no arrangement, no deception,
 no embroidery.

your style is as true as your vision.

in this asylum for the blind, Kertész sees for us.



Blind Musician, Abony, Hungary, 1921

Port of Embarkation, Braila, Rumania, 1918



Circus, Budapest, 1920



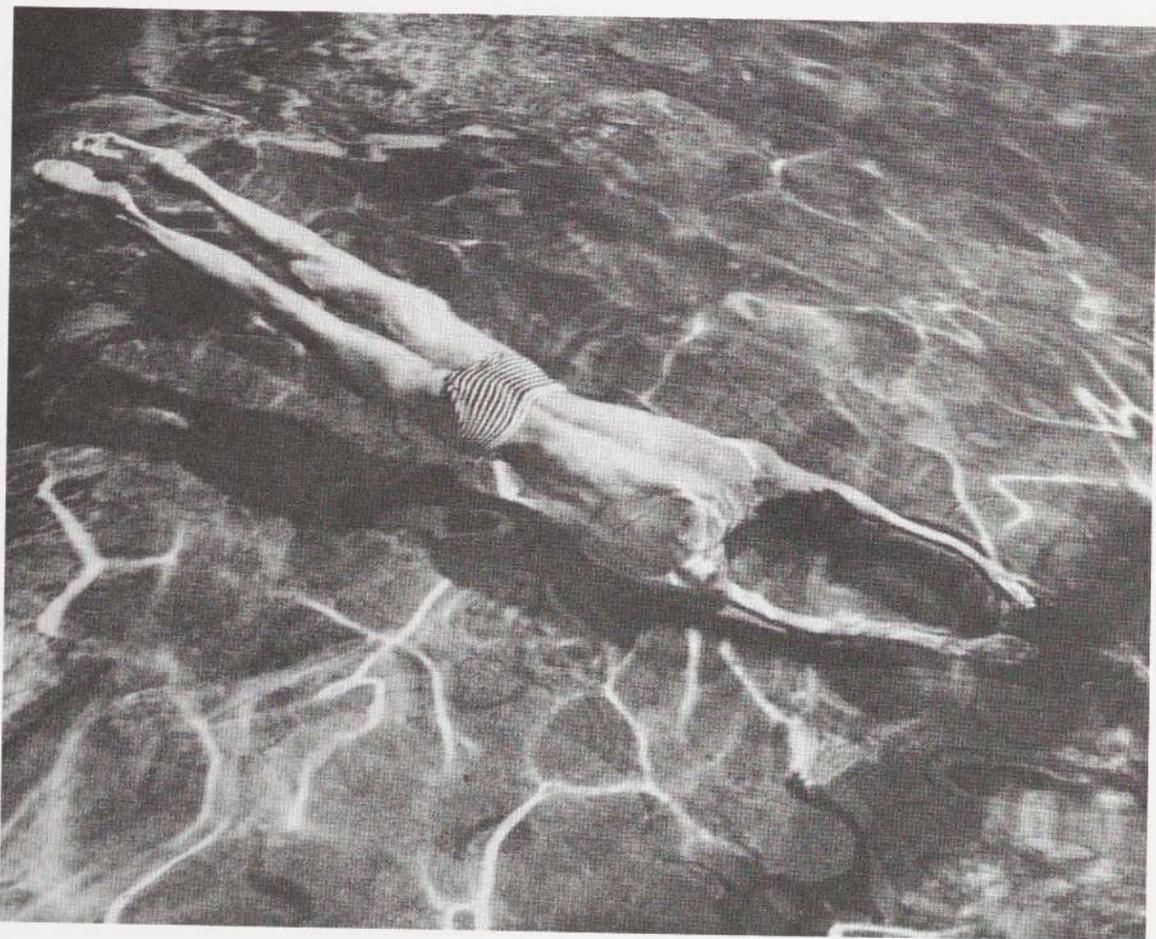


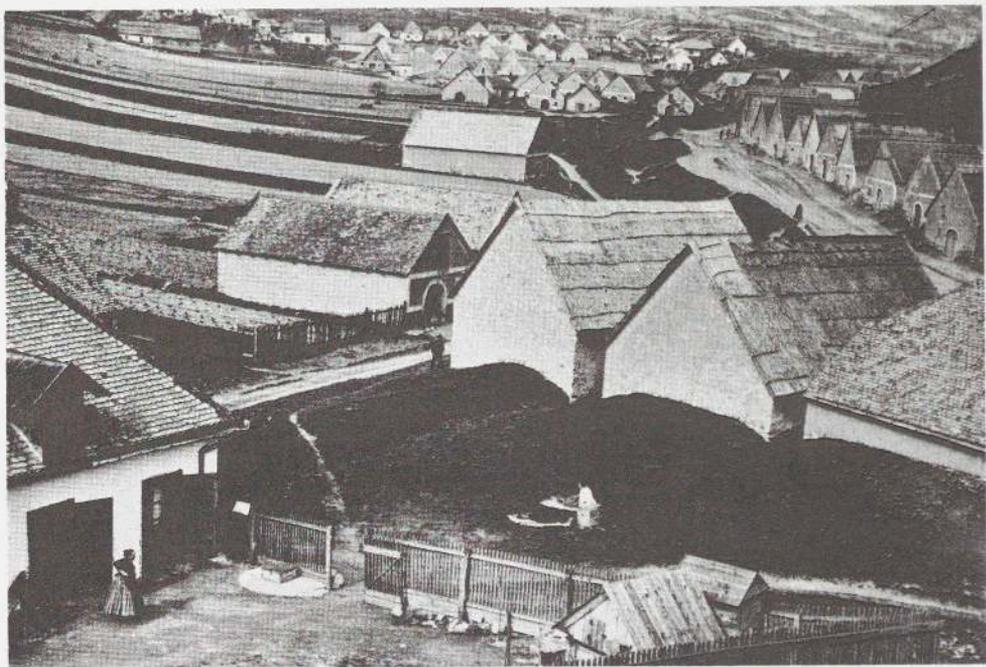
Trio, Ráczkeve, Hungary, 1923

Kiss, Budapest, 1920



Man Diving, Esztergom, Hungary, 1917





Budafok, Hungary, 1919



page 20: Paris, 1926

page 21: Montparnasse, 1928

Buda, Hungary, 1920

Feeding Time, Tisza-Szalka, Hungary, 1924





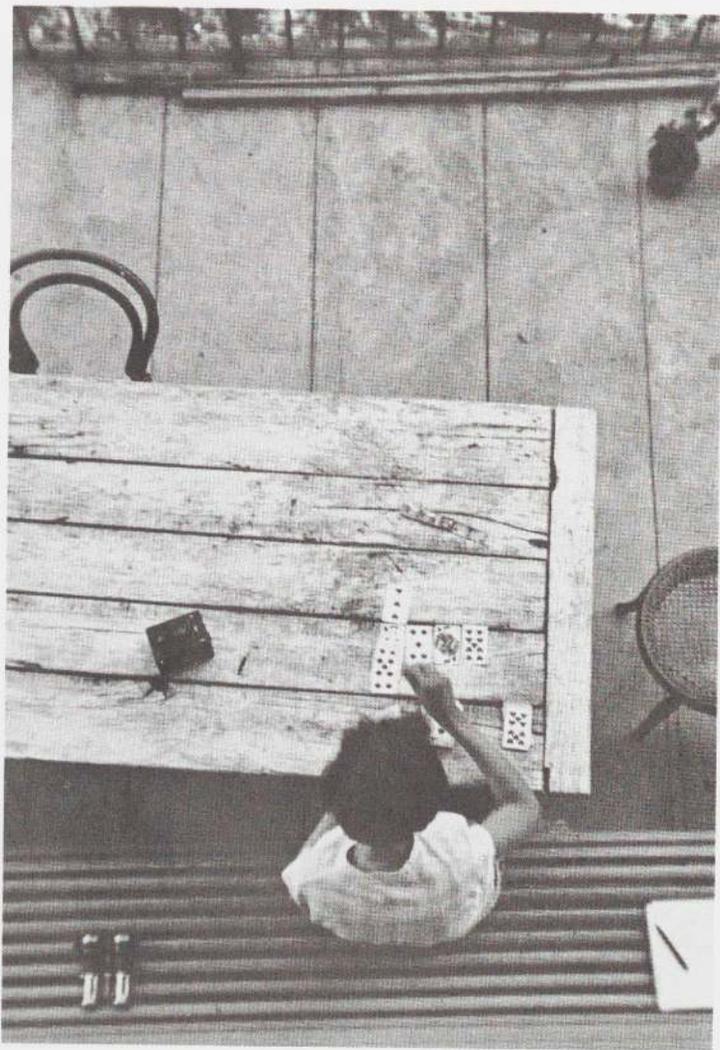




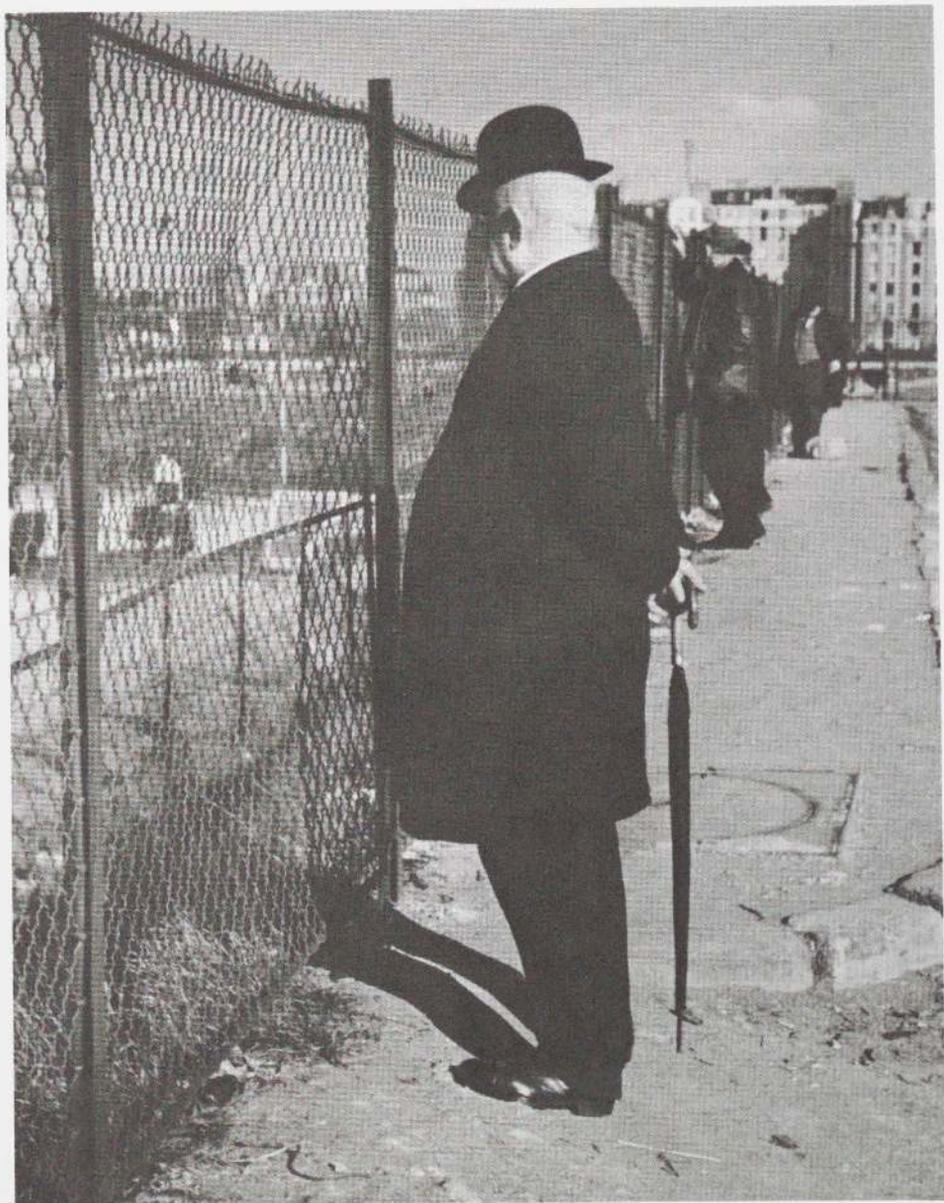
Satiric Dancer, Paris, 1926



Legs, Paris, 1925



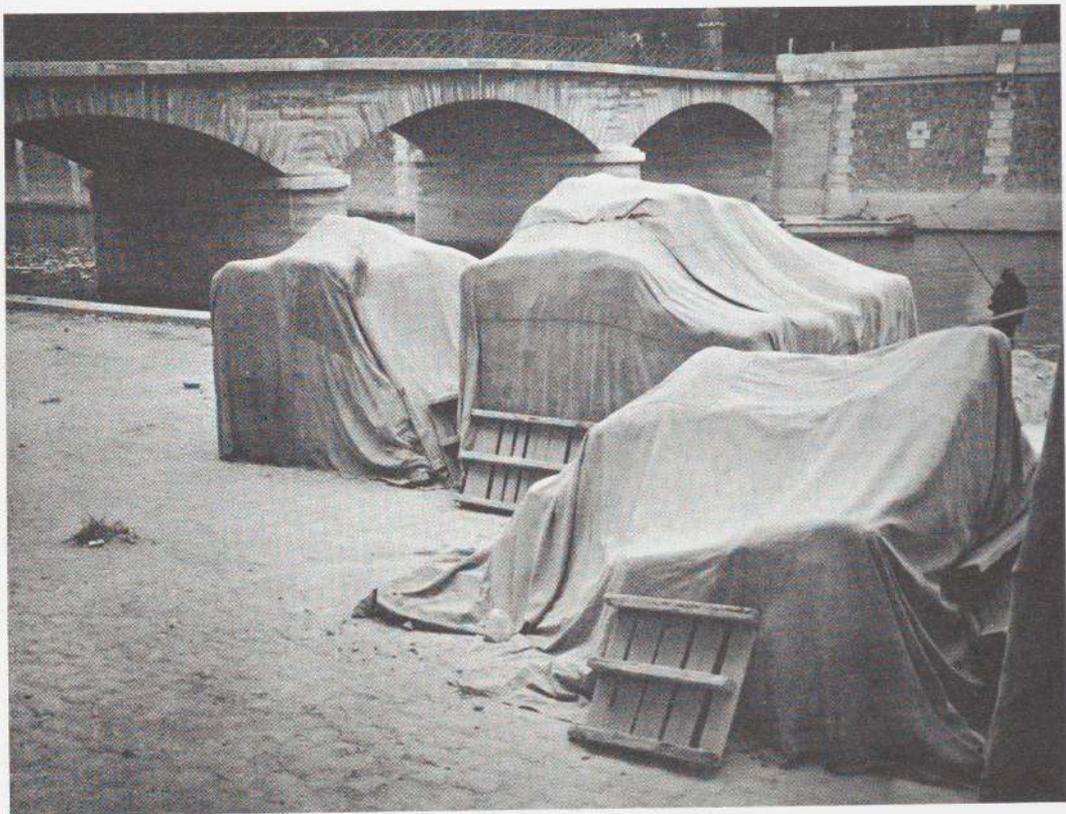
St. Gervais-les-Bains, 1929



Sunday, Paris, 1930



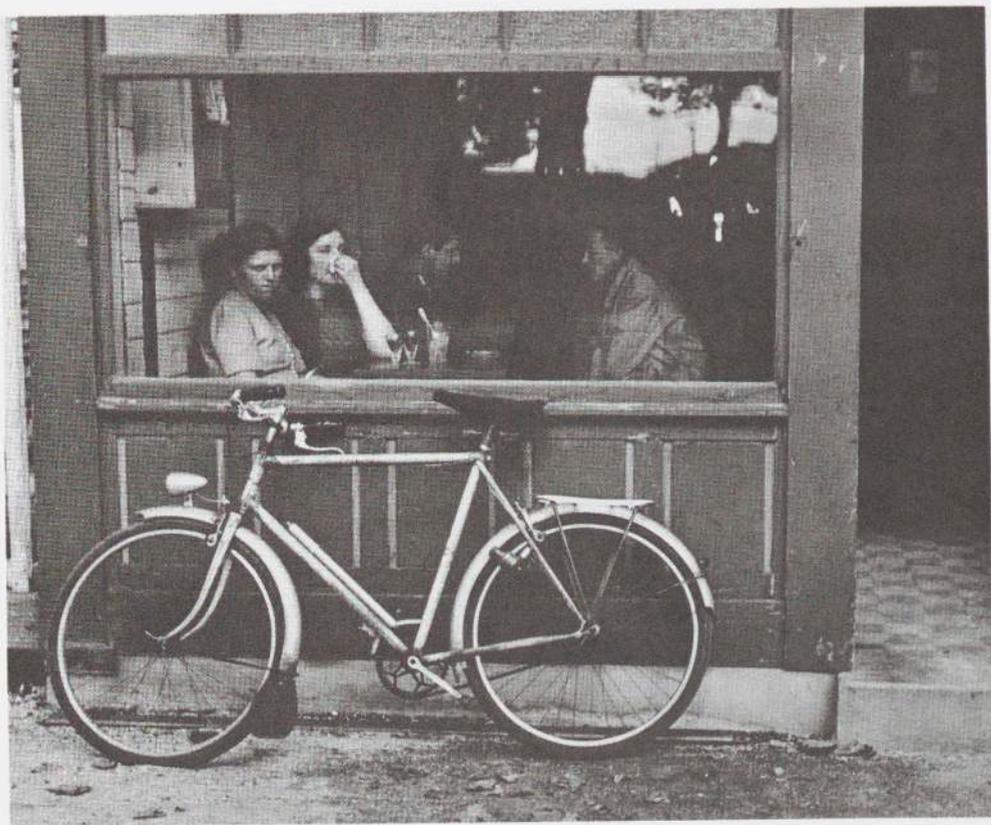
Montmartre, 1927



Quai de Bercy, 1926



Champs-Élysées, 1929



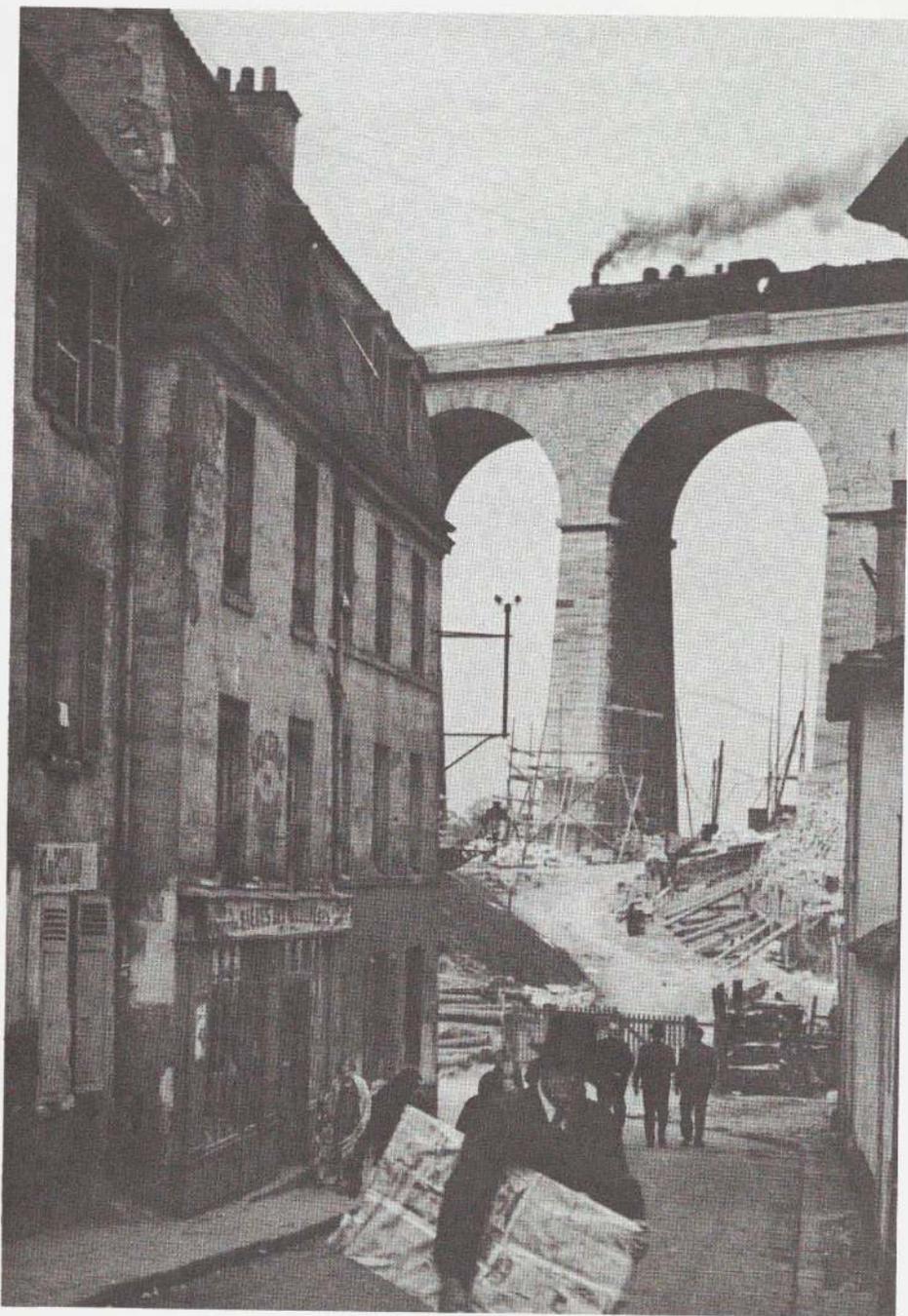
Bistro, 1930

Savoy Market, 1929

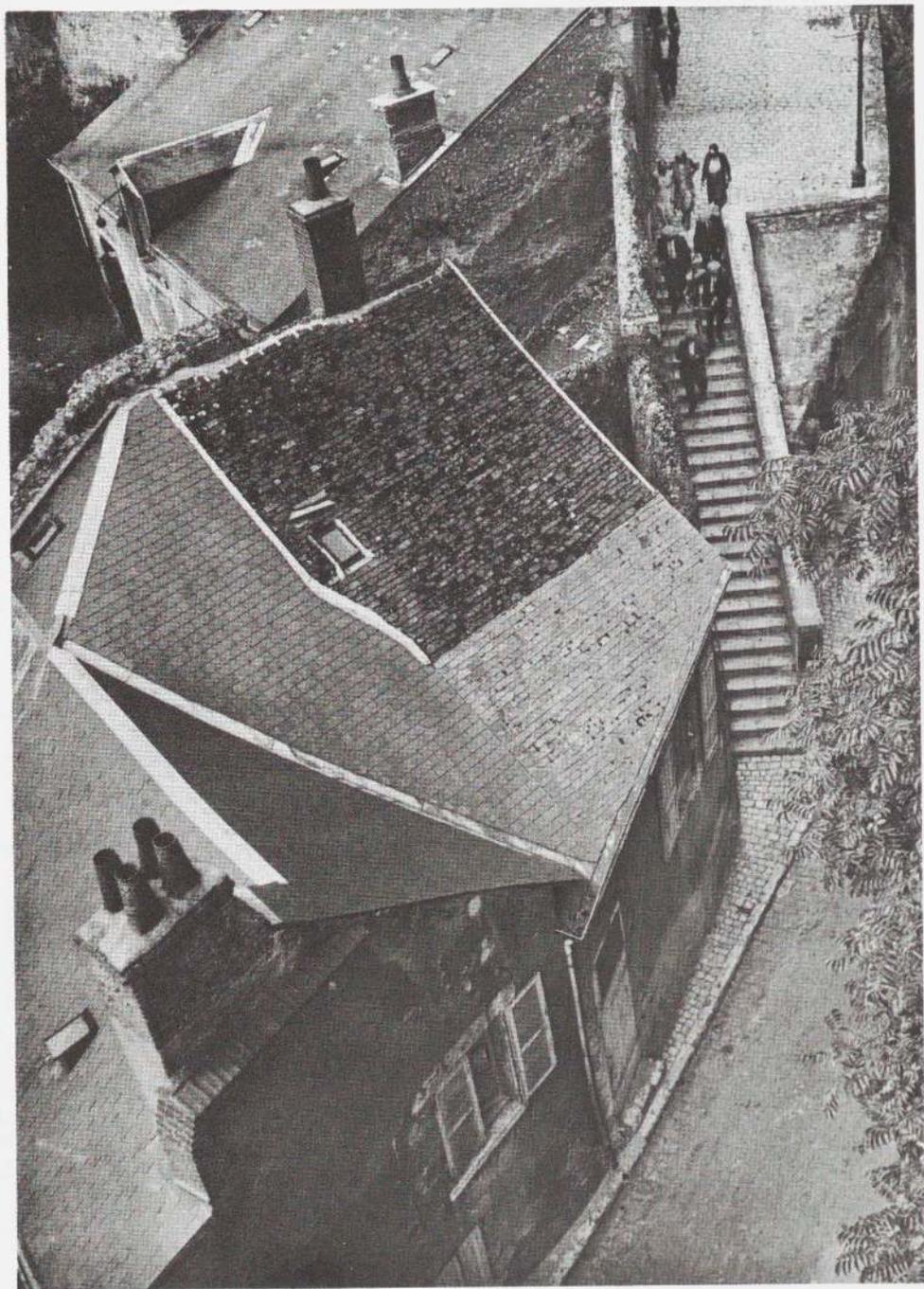




Dourdan, Ile de France, 1932



Meudon, 1928



Touraine, 1930

Chagall Family, 1933







Eisenstein, 1929-30

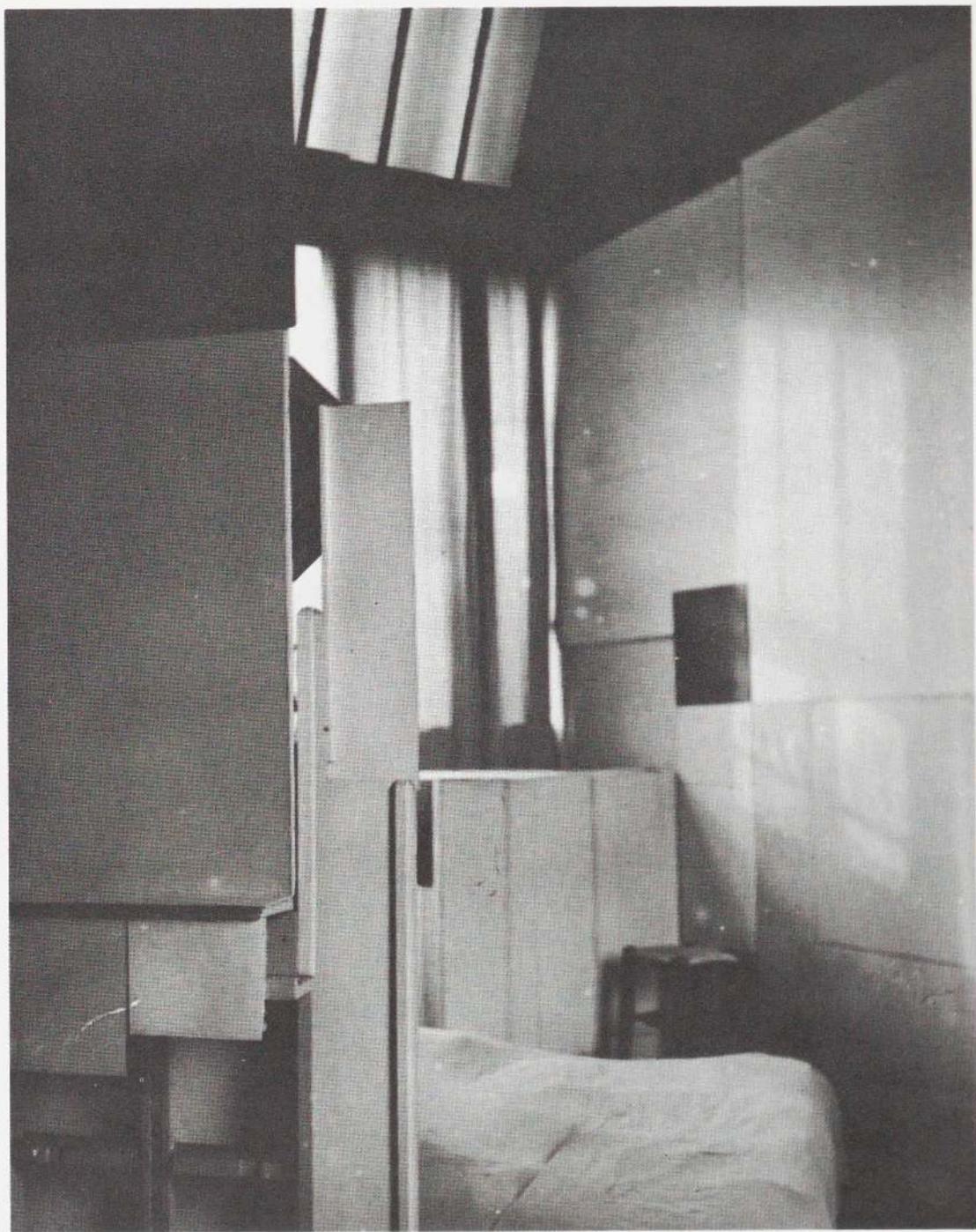


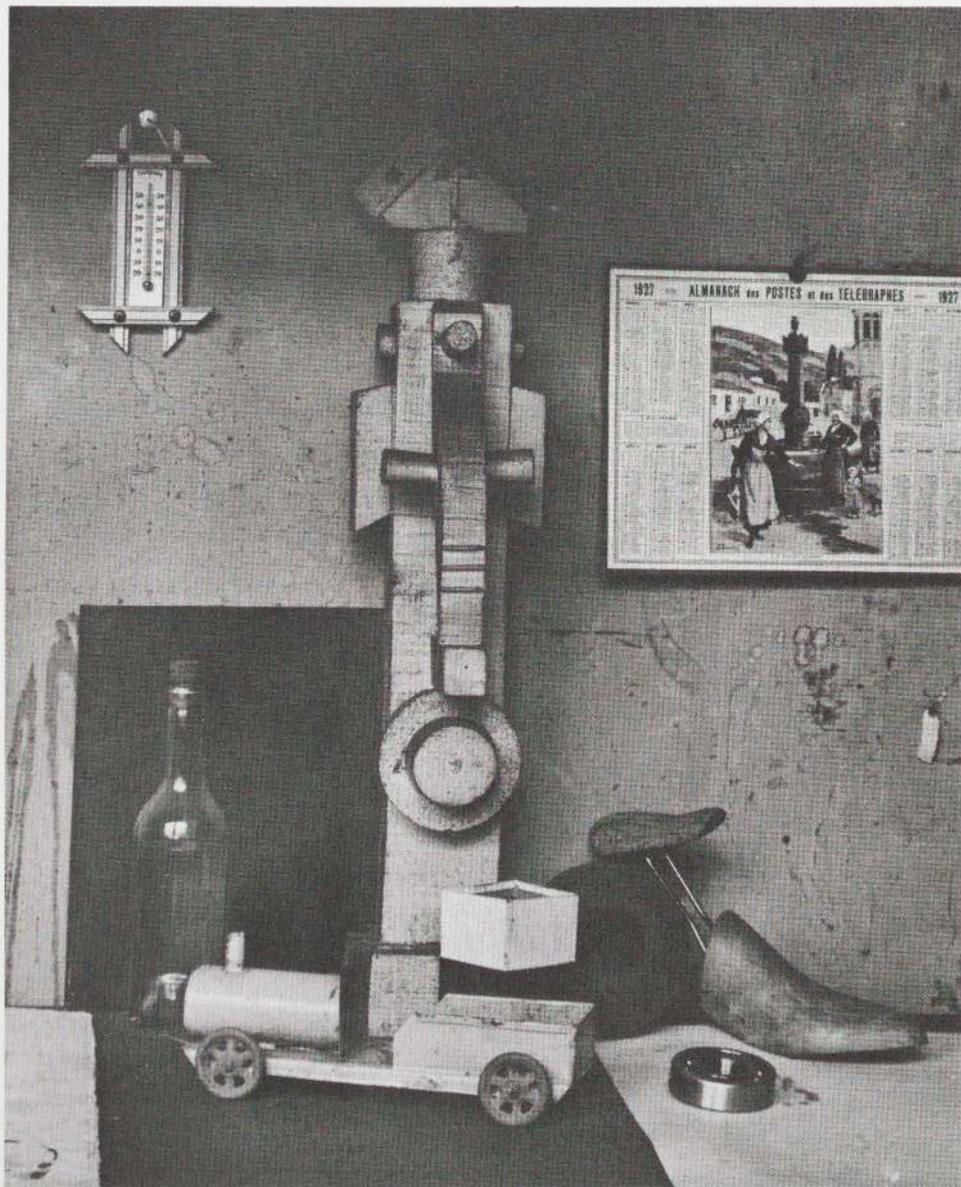
Vlaminck, c. 1928



Calder, 1929

Mondrian's Studio, 1926

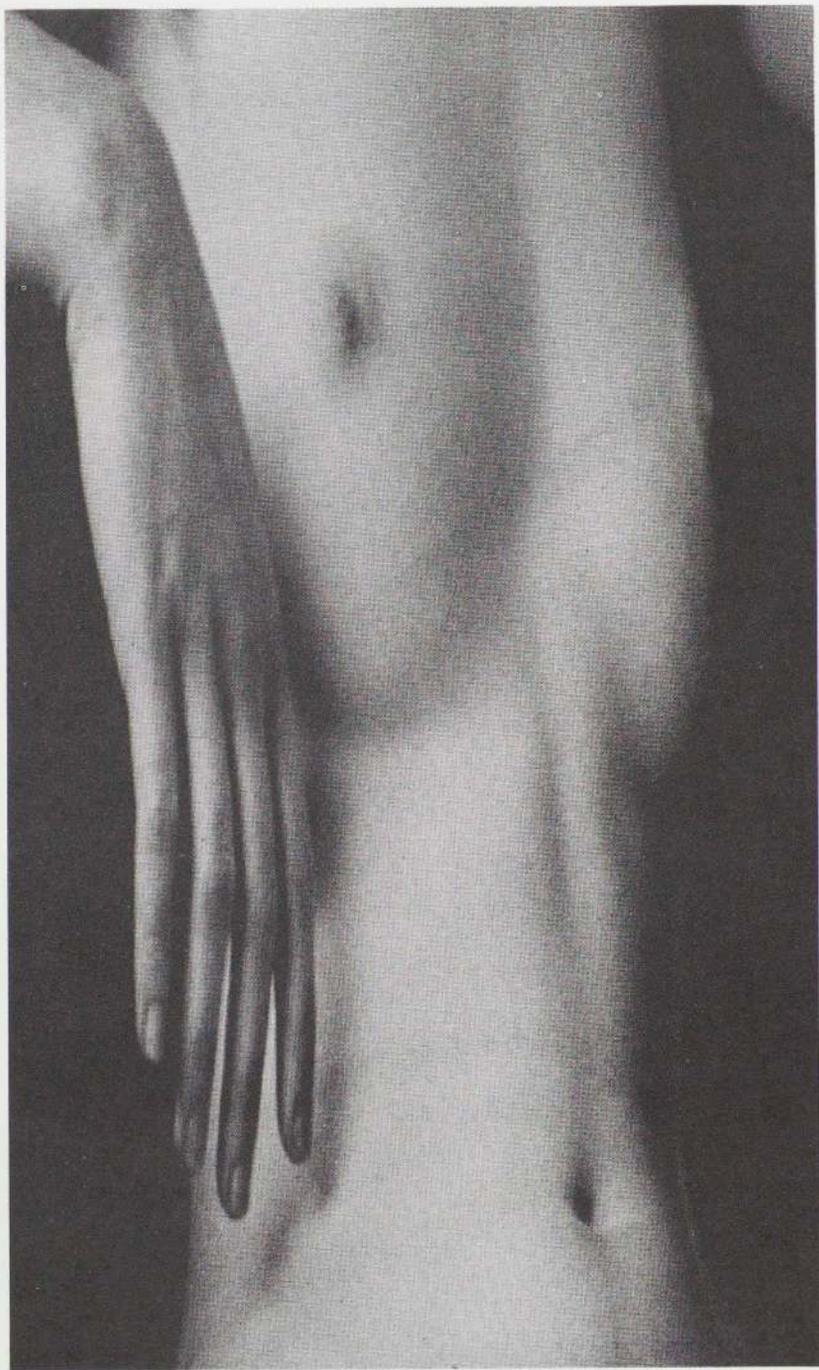




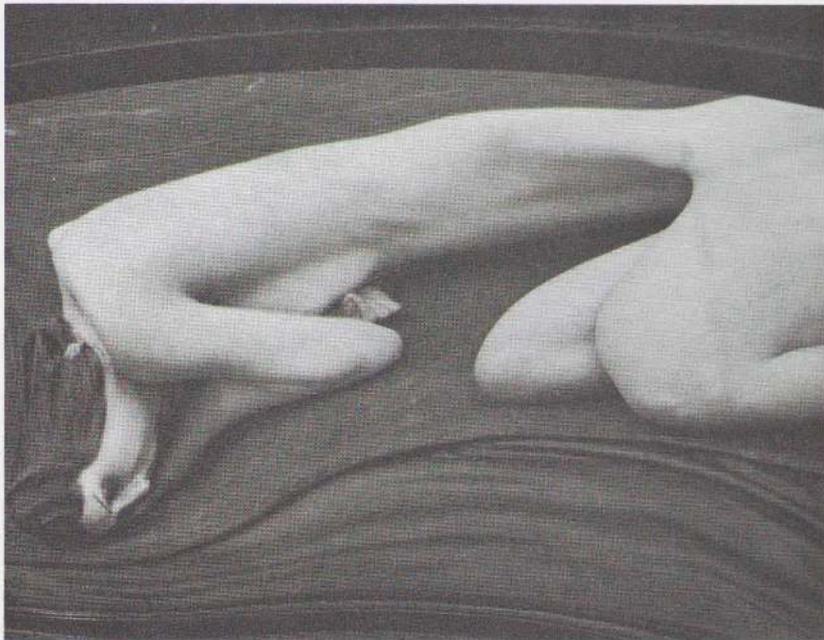
Corner of Léger's Studio, 1927

Léger's Studio with Assistant, 1927

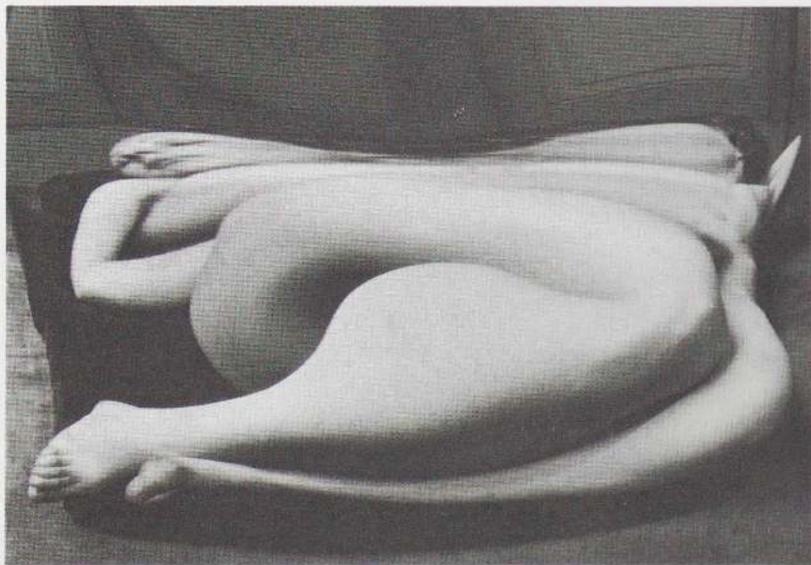




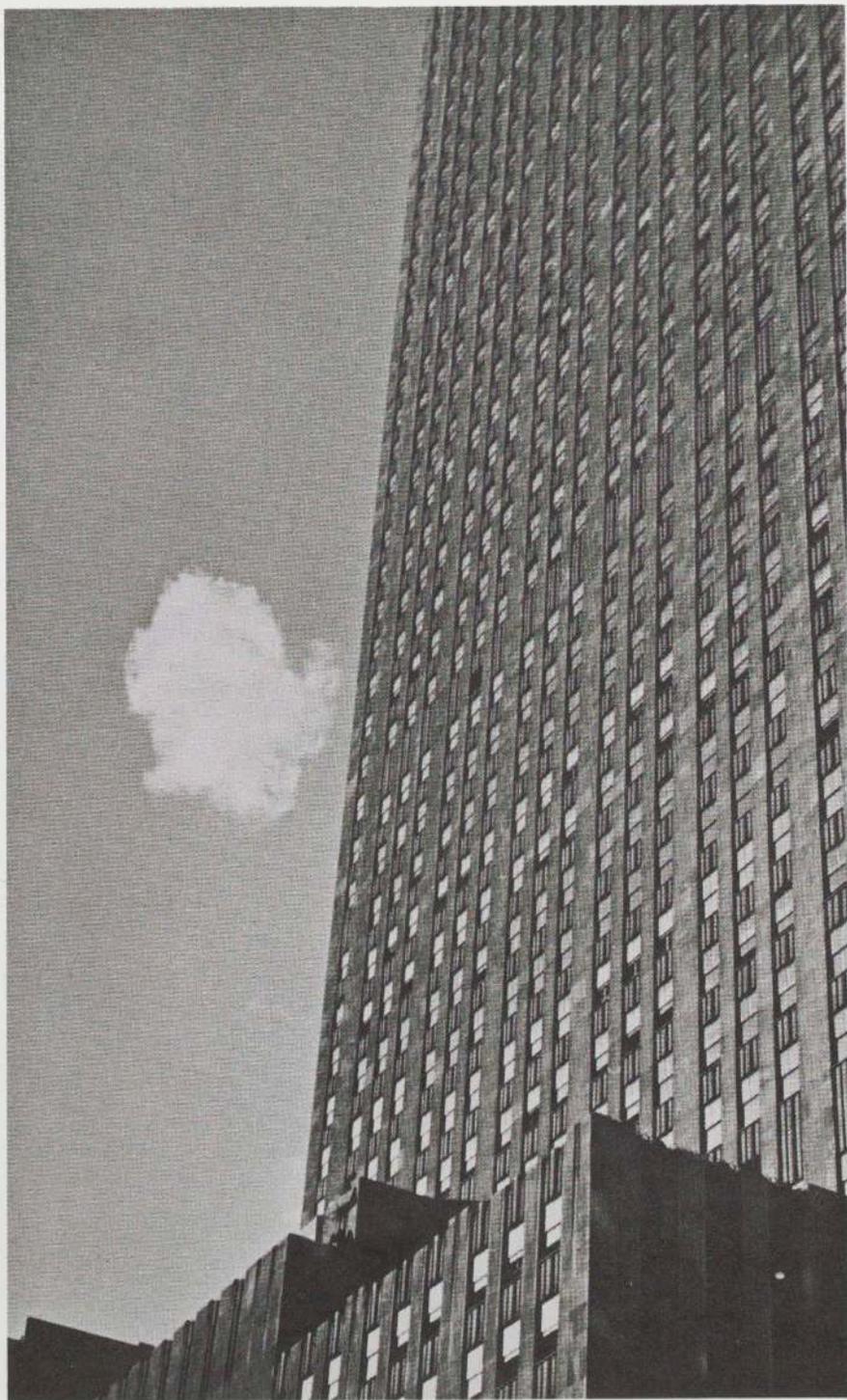
Distortion #6, 1933



Distortion #126, 1933



Distortion #34, 1933

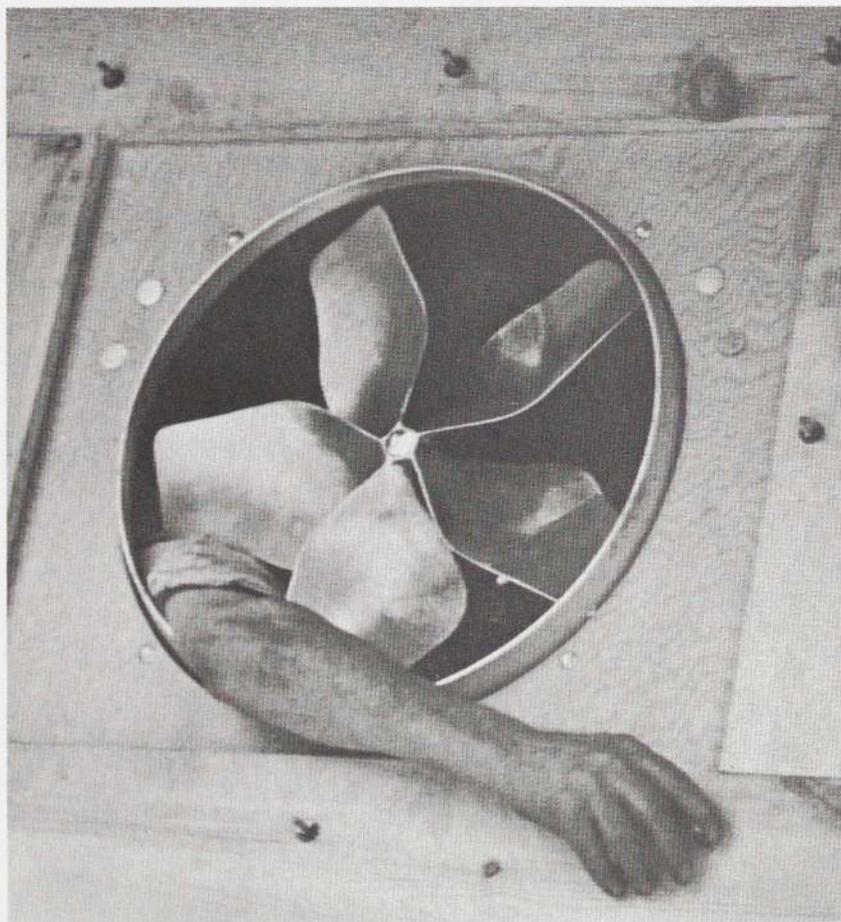


Lost Cloud, 1937

Railroad Station, 1937



Arm and Ventilator, 1937





Relaxation, 1943

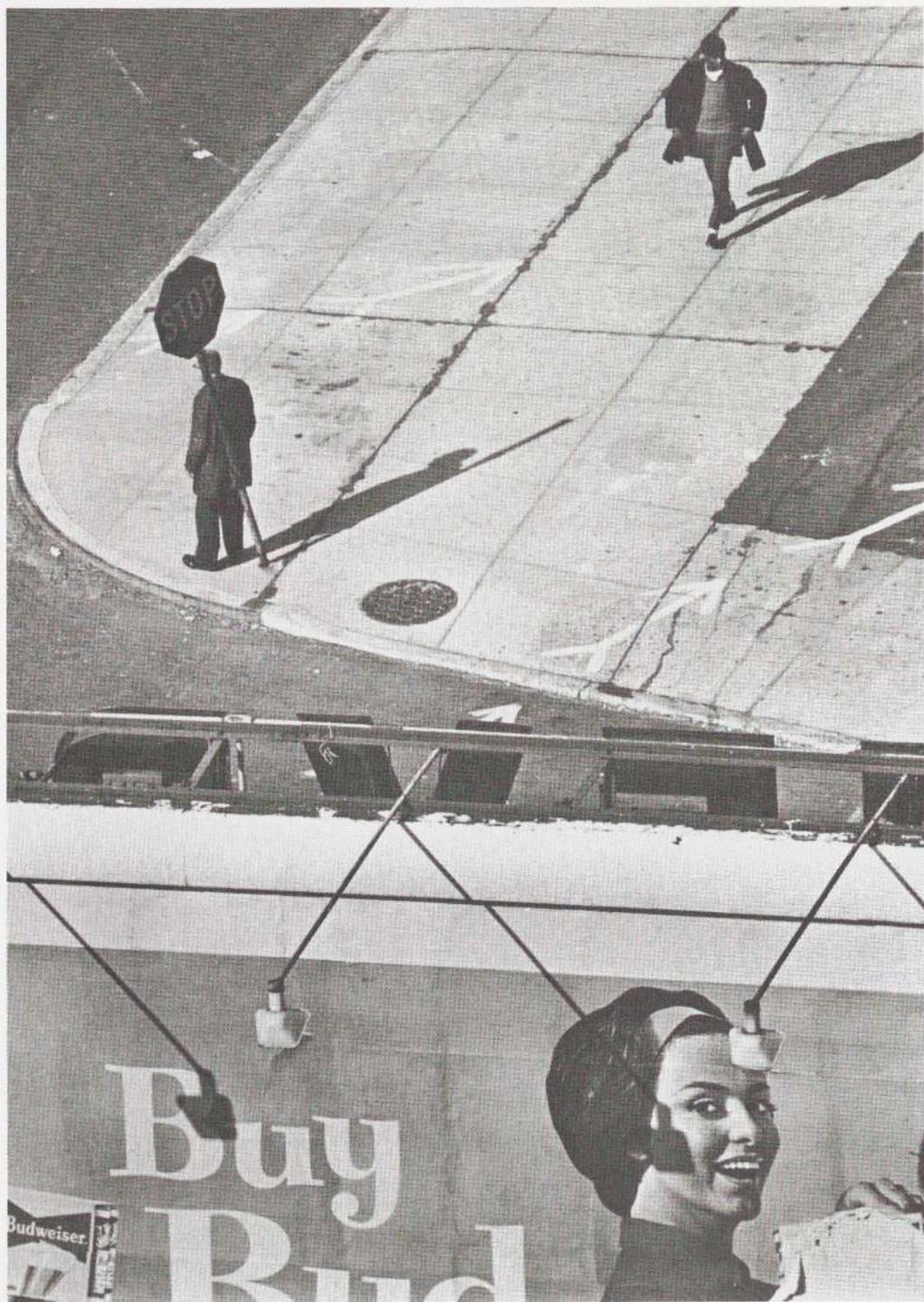


Lion and Shadow, 1942



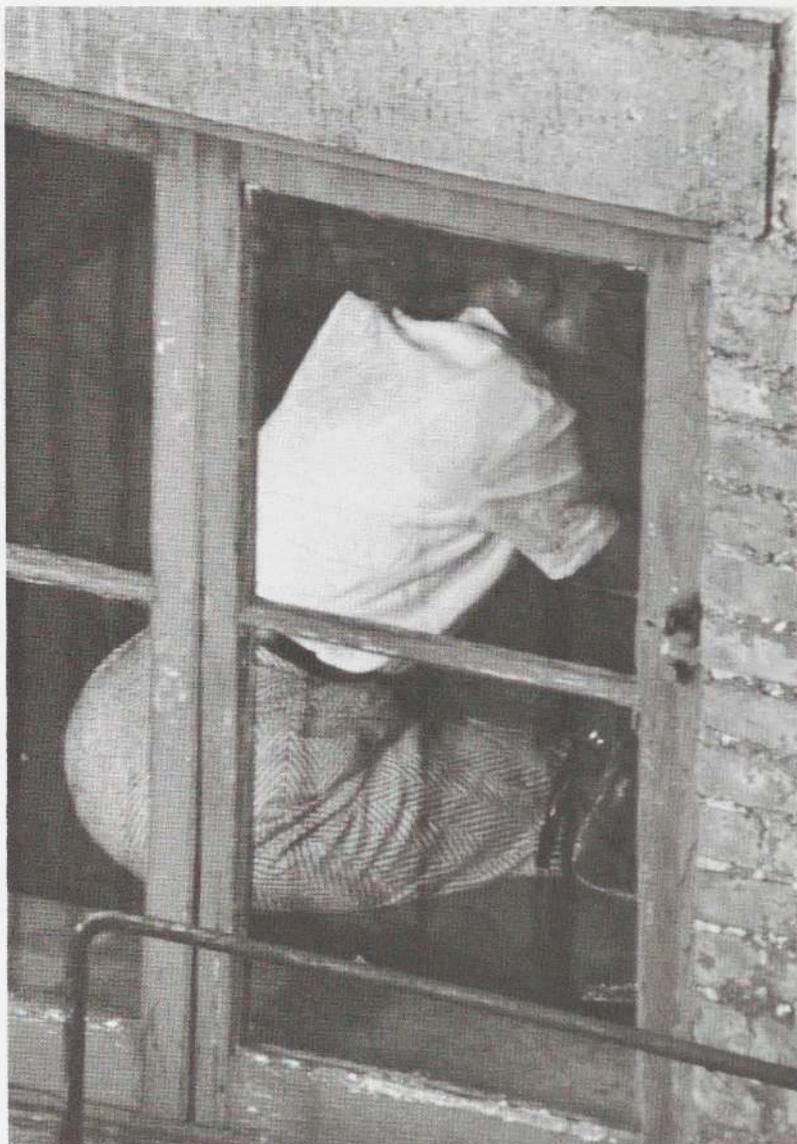
, 1942

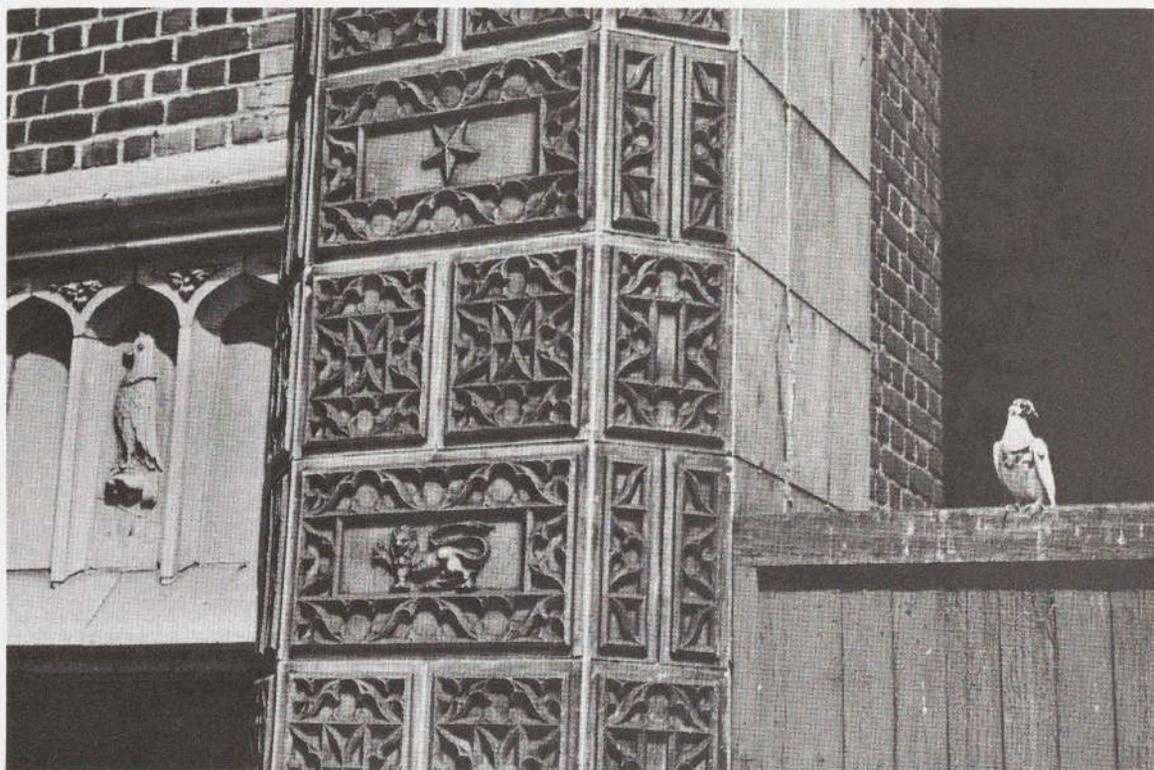
Crowninshield Garden, Wilmington, 1950



Billboard, 1962

Girl in the Window, 1961





Tudor City, 1962



Thomas Jefferson, Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum, 1961



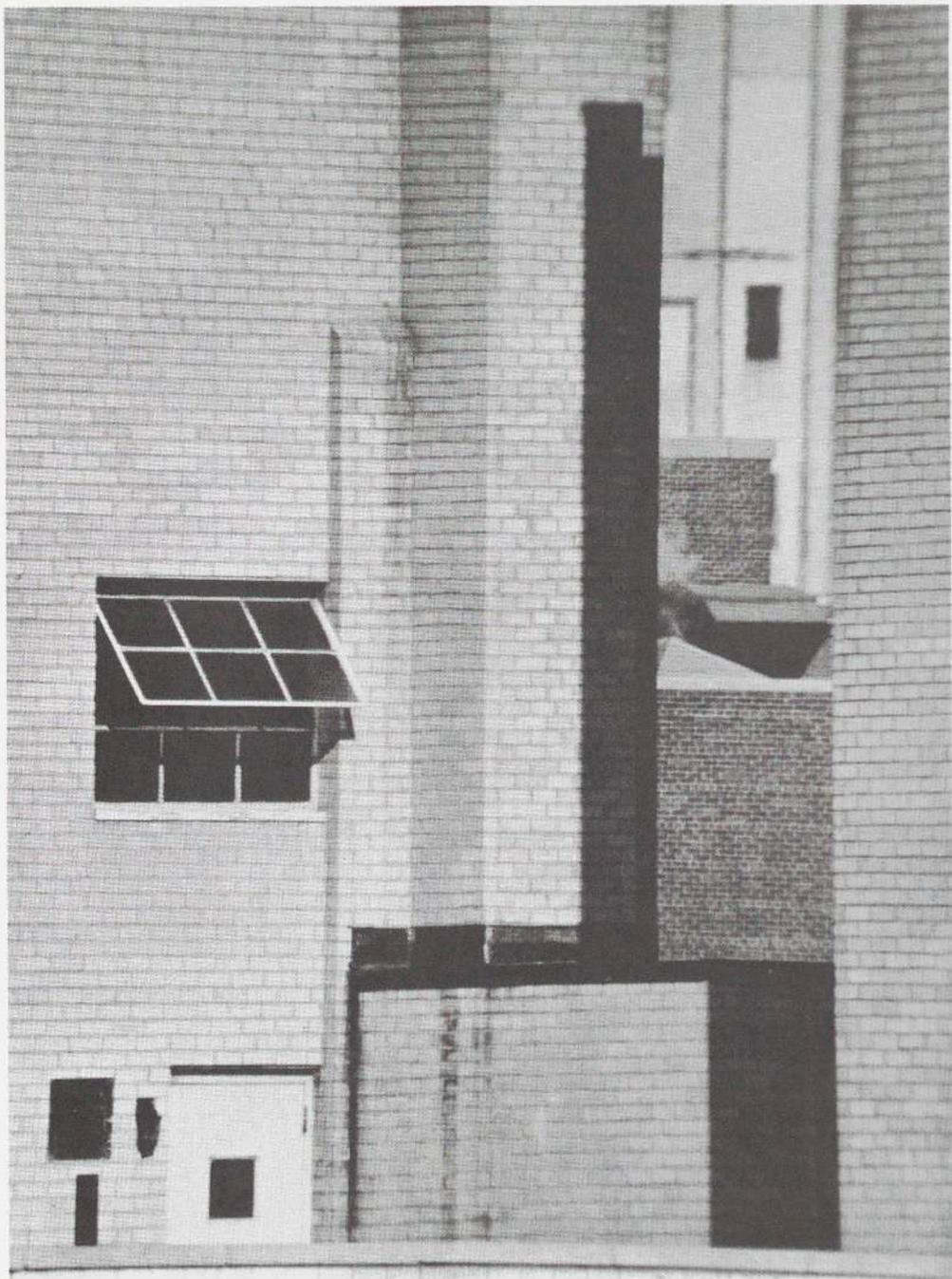
Incident, 1959



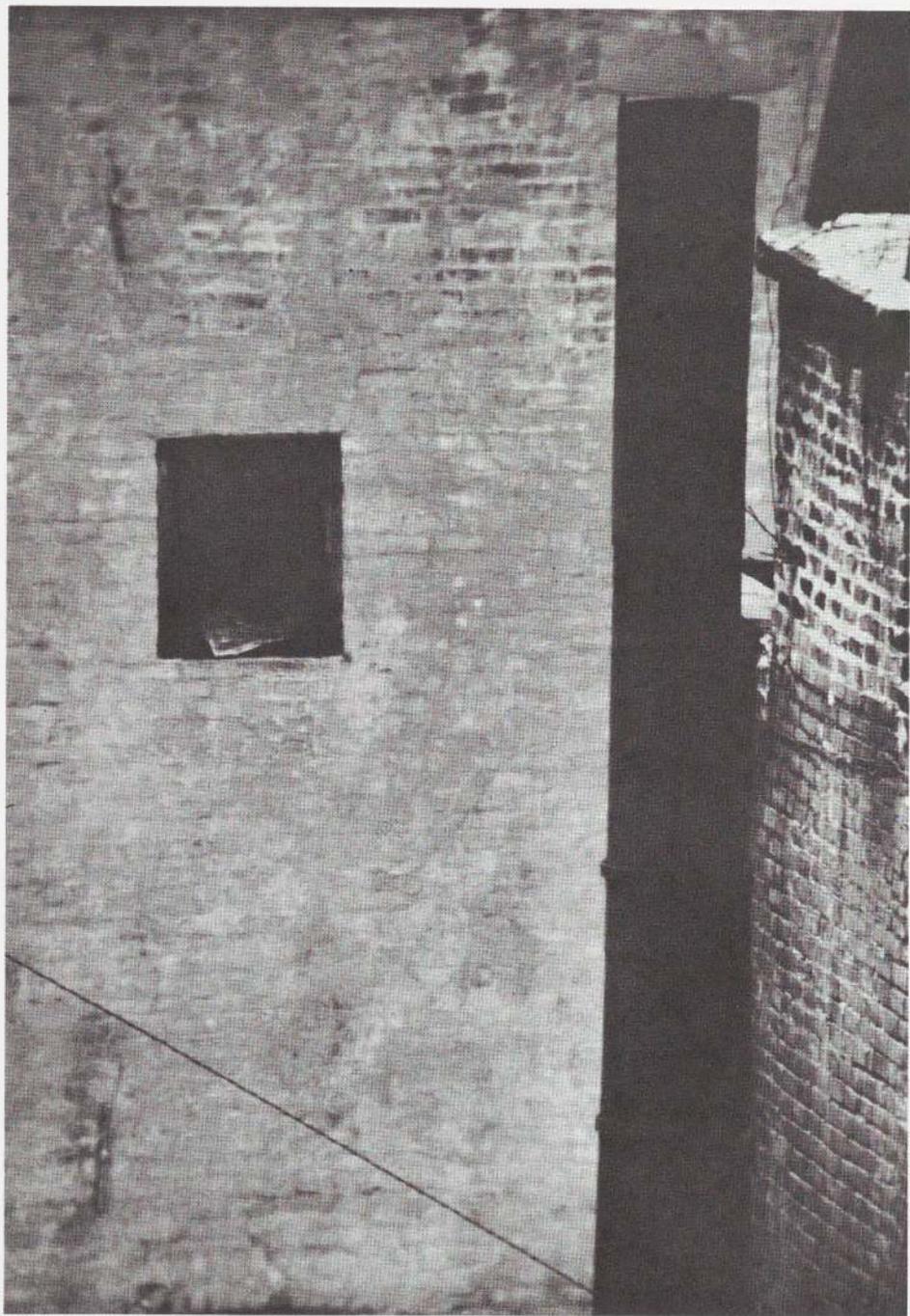
Untitled, 1962



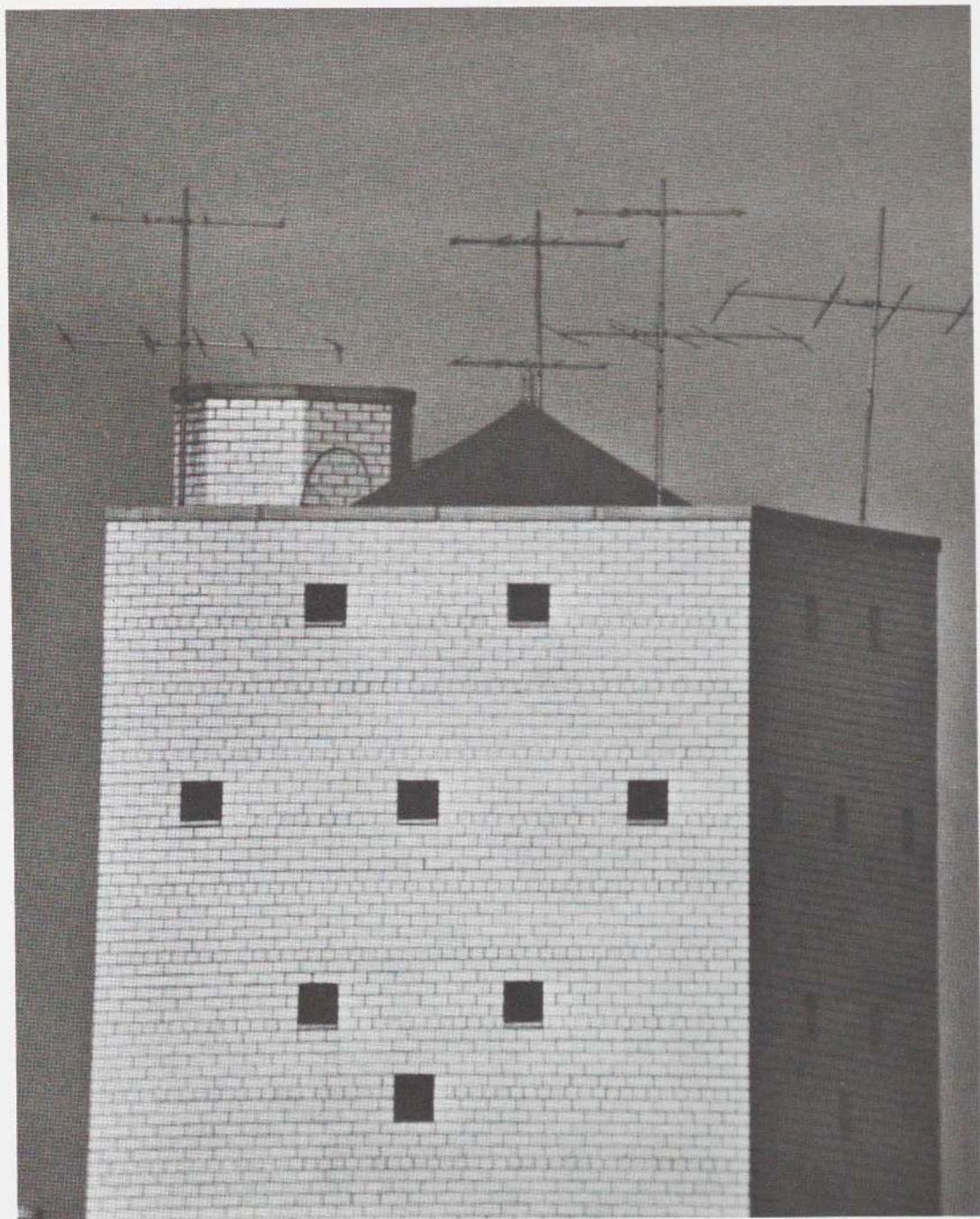
Village Tower, 1960



Brick Walls, 1961



Still Life with Exterior, 1960



Water Tower, 1962



Fall in the Tuileries, 1963

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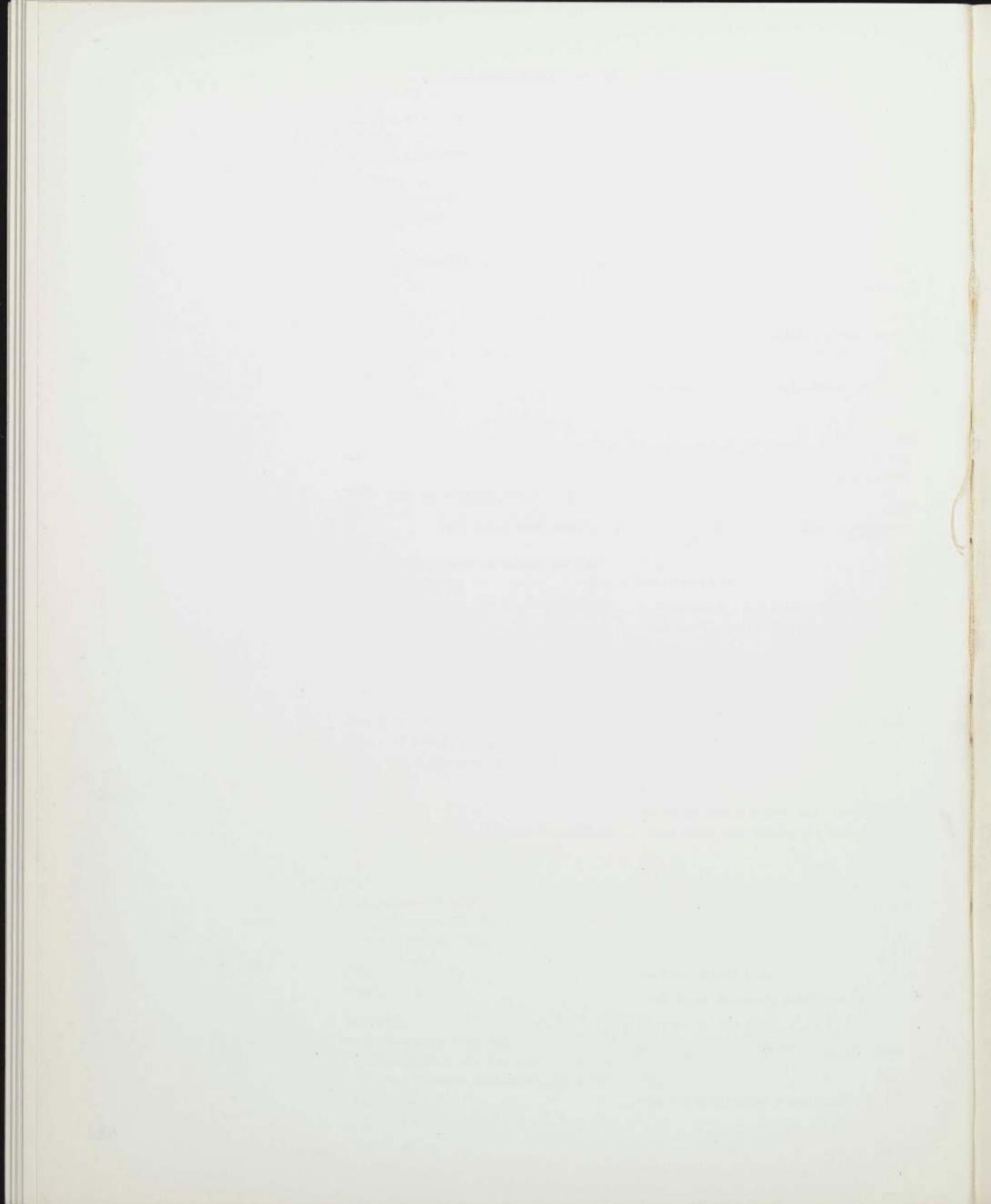
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BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 1894
Born July 2, Budapest, Hungary.
- 1912
Baccalaureate from Academy of Commerce, Budapest.
Takes job as office worker in Budapest Stock Exchange.
Buys first camera (box camera using 4.5x6 cm. plates) and begins shooting candid street scenes, genre subjects.
- 1914-1918
Serves in Hungarian army, photographs war and Commune period of 1918 as amateur.
- 1916
Receives prize for pictures by soldiers from *Borsszem Jankó* magazine.
- 1917
First published photos in *Erdekes Ujsag* magazine (March 25, p. 10, 13); first cover, June 26, 1925.
- 1925
Moves to Paris.
- 1925-1928
Does freelance reportage for *Le Matin*, *L'Intransigeant*, the *London Times*, *Le Nazione* Firenze, *Kölnische Illustrierte*, etc.
- 1927
Opening on March 12 of first one-man show, at Sacre du Printemps gallery.
- 1928
Buys first Leica.
Is selected for exhibition in First Independent Salon of Photography.
Vu begins publication, edited by Lucien Vogel; Kertész is major contributor.
- 1929
Photos purchased for collections of Staatliche Museen Kunstbibliothek, Berlin; König-Albert Museum, Zwickau.
- 1930
Art et Médecine begins publication; Kertész major contributor till 1936.
- 1932
Thirty-five prints included in exhibition of modern European photography, Julien Levy Gallery, New York.
- 1933
Marries Elizabeth Sali.
His book *Enfants* is published.
- 1934
Paris Vu Par André Kertész is published.
- 1936
Nos Amies les Bêtes is published.

Arrives in New York in October, under contract to Keystone Studios.	One-man exhibition, Long Island University.
1937	1963
Terminates contract with Keystone Studios.	One man exhibition, Modernage Studio, New York.
1937-1949	One-man exhibition, IV Mostra Biennale Internazionale della Fotografia, Venice; awarded gold medal.
Freelances for <i>Harper's Bazaar</i> , <i>Vogue</i> , <i>Town and Country</i> , etc.	One-man exhibition, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
1944	
Becomes American citizen.	
1945	
<i>Day of Paris</i> is published.	
1946	
One-man exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago.	
1949	
Signs exclusive contract with Condé Nast Publications.	
1962	Front Cover: First Class Funeral, 1928
Terminates contract with Condé Nast.	Back Cover: Bike Stand, 1961



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