

“Before my book on New York, I was a painter”

Cecily Nicholson

I am responding to a document I have not handled. Here is a digital image, a numeric representation: pixelated, portable, networked graphics. Given a lack of contact, I consider the state of photography in 1955, when this photograph was made in New York, before silver gelatin was eclipsed by consumer colour. I contemplate how the light is determined.

The close-up as “personal” assumes that what is near is intimate. It indicates permission for the viewer to “be there” and to participate, because the photographer *is* there, *is* participating—he can “see the colour of their eyes”; he can “hear the music.” It fulfills the viewer’s desire to be intimate rather than a voyeur. Yet this assumed closeness is not with the subjects; it is more likely with the image and the photographer.

3 Black Kids and Harmonica feels familiar to me—the fearless, wide-eyed, indifferent expressions; everyday plurality at a glance. Multiple subjects, brothers somehow. The sharpest focus lights the youngest cheek, the fur-telling weather, the hands of the harmonica player, the player’s foot, their young knees, and the side-eye taking in passersby. On the rough road for the background’s tires, the children are present, sitting curbside while other things are happening.

One almost looks past the face, foregrounded left, so near as to be a blur. Lens-like, search the depth of this small close-cropped field, consider the middle’s longing, and alight on the musician’s face and hands. The harmonica player contributes a quality of refusal. Not looking at the camera, not participating, the child must have been heard nonetheless. What is outside the frame seems relevant here. See that foot planted. Kids crouch ready to run even if in a burst of joy.

There’s a kind of coldness evident. Maybe taken during a shoulder season—early autumn before the coldest month of 1955 in New York (December)—or after a trying winter, kids outside to play and hustle in a spring shot through with cold spells. Early spring, say—hats, plaids in layers, breath no longer condensing, and hands warm enough to keep warm playing.

At the time, this image of some blur and grain and incident would have been new. It would have meant something akin to *raw* and *unschooled*. The image-capture appears purposeful and direct, as though composed by Klein in the moment. Still, I read the subjects of capture to be uncomposable. The kinetic qualities are *theirs*, and of *their* time. The Sixties lay ahead.



William Klein

3 Black Kids and Harmonica, 1955
gelatin silver print, 24.8 x 32.4 cm