SESSION 18 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Jan 26, 2027

Malick Sidibé

1935–2016 · Malian

'I photograph happiness' — joy as a political act



Nuit de Noël (Happy Club) · 1963

“I photograph happiness.”

— Malick Sidibé

KEY WORKS

- Nuit de Noël (Happy Club), 1963 — the Christmas dance
- Regardez-moi!, 1962 — a young man's pride
- Beach scenes, Bamako, 1970s — youth on the river
- Studio portraits with radios, bikes, sunglasses

CONTEXT

Sidibé photographed the youth of Bamako from the early 1960s onwards — the dance halls, the beaches, the portrait studio, the streets. His subjects were young, newly independent (Mali became independent from France in 1960), hungry for modernity and music and fun. He photographed them with a flash that turned night into day and joy into evidence. He said: 'I photograph happiness.'

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Sidibé is the counterpoint to the heavy, serious photographers that can dominate photography education. Joy is a legitimate subject. Flash used as celebration rather than confrontation is a legitimate technique. His work also demonstrates that the snapshot aesthetic — flash, grain, slightly chaotic composition — can be as intentional as a carefully composed platinum print.

STUDIO PORTRAITS: RADIOS, BIKES, SUNGLASSES



Friends on Mopeds



Young Man with Vespa

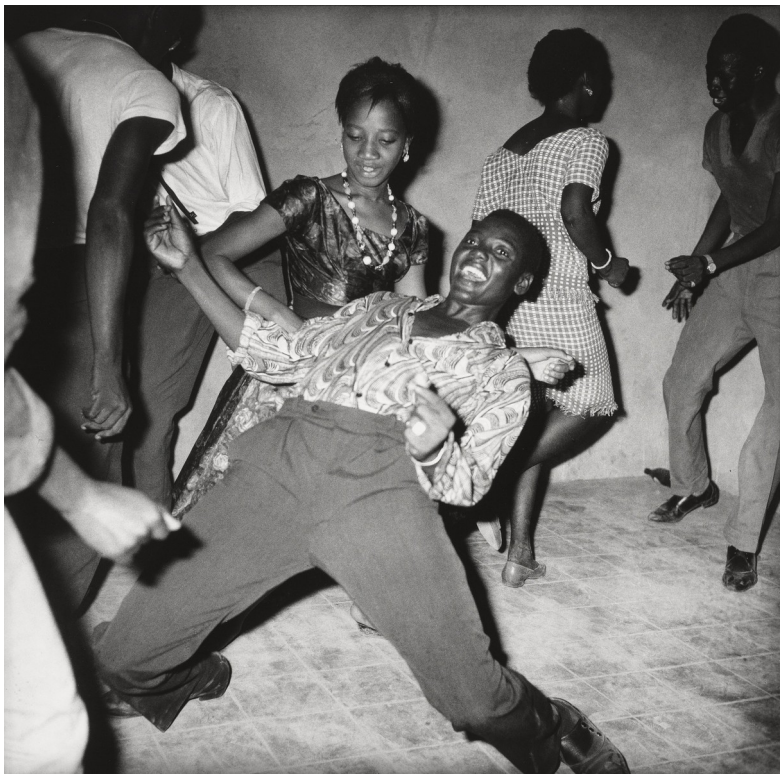


Portrait with Radio

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sidibé said 'I photograph happiness.' Is happiness a photographic subject? What does happiness look like in a photograph?
2. He photographed his own community — people he knew, who knew him, who wanted to be photographed. How does that relationship shape the image?

MORE IMAGES



Regardez-moi! · 1962



Beach scenes, Bamako · 1970s