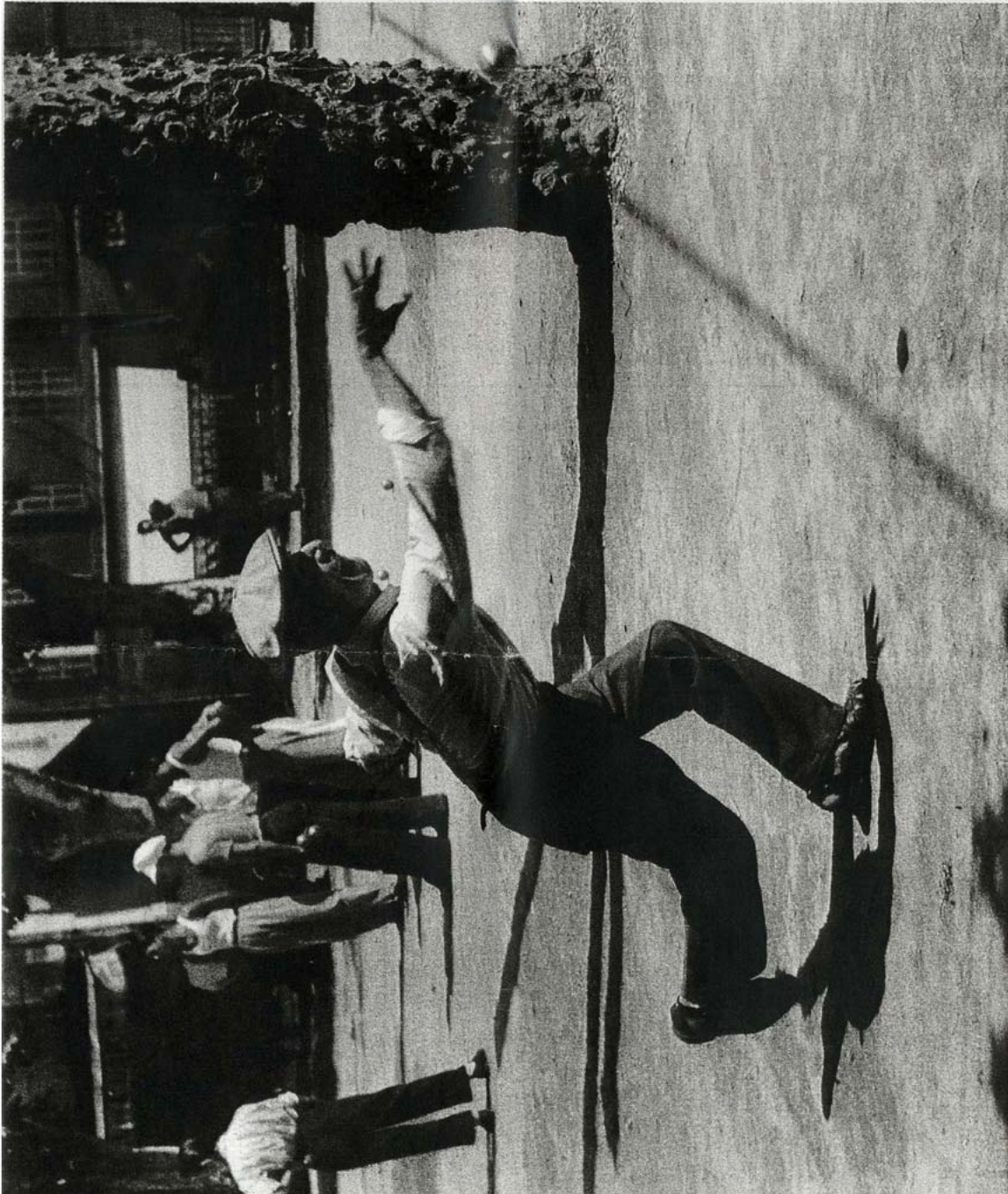


'I'm very suspicious of images that are indecipherable without the crutch of words, I mean those that result merely from the desire to surprise.' In 'Willy Ronis' (Taschen, £14.99), this statement is printed underneath 'La Pétanque' (1947, Aubagne en Provence), a photograph in which surprise is the dominant theme. An old gent executes a 'demi-portée' with athletic dynamism. The angle is chosen to exaggerate movement: the foreshortened legs and body direct the eye towards the extended throwing arm, the wrist whipped round in a blur that contrasts with the attentive stillness of the well-lined face. Ronis's pictures are designed to be read, some elements resolving themselves faster than others. The photographs often appear to be genial records of everyday working-class life – occupying a space somewhere between Robert Doisneau's comic and romantic stories from the Parisian streets and René-Jacques's moody architectural compositions – but surprises lurk in them. In his reports of the 1930s factory strikes, the last element you distinguish is always the single face staring out of the crowd at the photographer, somehow not swept away. Ronis's documentary photographs from the 1940s and 1950s often look very like those of his contemporaries – Brassai, Cartier-Bresson – and they repeat one another's arrangements. Cartier-Bresson's iconic 'Rue Mouffetard' (1954), in which a grinning boy runs down the street clutching two magnums of wine, is a cleaner retake of Ronis's 'Le Petit Parisien', shot two years earlier, in which the prize is a baguette. Ronis, an underappreciated photographer, helped develop a visual vocabulary that is perhaps the strongest single influence on modern photojournalism: the striking angle, the foregrounded frame which is only half-noticed.



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