

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## WALL LABEL

JOSEF KOUDELKA  
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The Czech photographer Josef Koudelka was born in the Moravian town of Boskovice in 1938, the year in which the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany began the dismemberment of the young Czechoslovakian republic. Koudelka attended the Technical University of Prague, and took his degree in aeronautical engineering. He worked in this field until 1967; since then he has devoted himself entirely to photography. His earlier work as a photographer was concerned largely with interpretation of the theater, and includes a book on Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi and considerable work for the magazine Divadlo (Theater). In the past decade the major continuing subject of his work has been the Gypsies of Europe. Koudelka left Czechoslovakia in 1968--the year in which the "Prague Spring" was answered with military occupation by the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria. He has since traveled in England, France, Ireland, and Spain.

The Czech critic Anna Fárová has noted that photographers in her country have generally regarded the expressive and the documentary functions of their medium as antithetical. In this view, the artistic potentials of photography are served by idealized interpretations of recognizably poetic subject matter. Photographs with topical relevance, on the other hand, are judged by a utilitarian standard, to which aesthetic values are thought irrelevant.

Elsewhere such attempts to divide the role of photography into spiritual and mundane categories have met with little success. The first option, in attempting to serve purely aesthetic goals, has produced a

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progressively desiccated pictorialism, since it assumes that fundamental questions of content have already been answered. The second option, with its belief that content is separable from form, has generally produced pictures which are lumpen, vague, and graceless, and which can be defended only by their captions.

As Fárová has pointed out, the work of Josef Koudelka does not fit either of these categories. His favored subject matter is similar to that made familiar by a half-century of photojournalism--exotic people in unfamiliar places, engaged in those semipublic street ceremonies that are most easily accessible to the camera. But his pictures suggest that his intention is less reportorial than formal and interpretive.

The pictures shown here are selected from Koudelka's best photographs of the past decade, without reference to their nominal subjects. They are nevertheless united by a coherence of style and spirit. The character of the visual patterns that identify Koudelka's work is reminiscent of Cartier-Bresson, but these structures serve a very different sense of life. Koudelka's pictures seem to concern themselves with prototypical rituals, and a theater of ancient and unchangeable fables. Their motive is perhaps not psychological but religious. Perhaps they describe not the small and cherished differences that distinguish each of us from all others, but the prevailing circumstance that encloses us.

John Szarkowski

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