



Romania, 1968.

## KOUDELKA AT THE HAYWARD

by John Stathatos

The Hayward's Koudelka retrospective has gone a long way towards redeeming an otherwise unimpressive year for photography in London, made all the more interesting by the fact that despite Koudelka's acknowledged stature, the majority of prints will be seen for the first time. Indeed, few exhibitions have been as eagerly awaited, for apart from the 1975 *Gypsies* and a slim monograph published last year in the 'Grandi Fotografi' series, recent examples of Koudelka's work have been restricted to a few anthologies.

His single-minded dedication, infrequent printing and reluctance to comment on his work are by now well known. "I do not judge other photographers by what they say, but by their pictures", he wrote in a statement compiled with Bryn Campbell, "and I want to be judged by the same standards myself".<sup>1</sup> This is an attitude not merely understandable but positively refreshing when

contrasted to the work of photographers for whom an image is little more than a peg from which to hang a mass of verbiage; it is nevertheless obvious that to regard Koudelka's work as simply an 'innocent' assemblage of images can only result in the most superficial understanding. Some attempt must be made to locate his photographs, or by virtue of their very power the process of viewing becomes self-defeating.

It is tempting to think of Koudelka as a purely documentary photographer, particularly when considering his records of gypsy life, but such a categorisation seems increasingly unsatisfactory as it becomes apparent that though his photographs are packed with information, it is information of a singularly intractable nature. Fascinating things are depicted in them, but what are they, and why? Given their totally uninformative titles (place and year) they can easily be misread, as when John Szarkowski

reads the photograph of an arrest in a village to be that of a man facing imminent execution.<sup>2</sup> If these photographs are documentary, it is only in the sense of carrying a strong flavour of their subjects' strangeness — or is it Koudelka's strangeness after all?

Taken in Moravia between 1962 and 1968, over a quarter of the exhibition prints are from *Gypsies*, amply confirming their status as 20th century classics. Though not original, it is worth reiterating the perception that Koudelka was heavily influenced by his early theatre photography. His subjects appear actors in dramas of their own devising, while the few photographs of empty interiors appear like vacant but expectant sets. The remarkable thing is that this sense of drama is present not only in scenes of inexplicable activity seized on the wing, but also in the formal portraits. What stage director could possibly have contrived the pose of the old

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Spain 1971.

gypsy with a bandana knotted round his bare chest, looming with eyes closed above his wife? And this enforced strangeness confirms the realisation that though Koudelka's images are highly charged with drama, they are somehow never 'stagey'.

The remainder of the exhibition is largely unfamiliar. Considered in rough chronological order, it includes first of all some additional prints of East European gypsies, dating mostly from 1968. Every bit as brilliant as those in the monograph, two in particular stand out. The first shows a young girl smiling at the camera from the far end of a claustrophobic, windowless room, empty except for a few cooking pots by the girl's feet and a long black smear of soot staining the wall. The second, to my mind, one of Koudelka's strongest compositions, is of a man and a horse apparently deep in conversation. The man is squatting with his face turned towards the horse, one hand lifted in emphasis; seen in full profile, the massive white animal, head gravely inclined, is obviously giving the man his full attention. The image has that sense of stillness and privacy so often characteristic of Koudelka.

Also preceding the photographer's departure from Czechoslovakia in 1970 is a small group of prints taken in Prague following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, which alone would have made any photographer's reputation. While three of these depict defiance in the streets during the invasion itself, the most powerful is of a protest march at night one year later. The top part of the photograph is dominated by a huge placard with the face of Jan Palach; star refractions from street lights burn beneath and around it. The bottom third is filled with the

impassive faces of marchers, the one in the middle neatly bisected by the placard's handle.

In 1971 Koudelka acquired British citizenship, one result of which was the award of an ACGP grant and major bursary to photograph gypsies in the British Isles. Though some of the results are included, his most interesting work during the seventies seems to have been in Spain and Ireland. No longer focussing exclusively on travelling people, Koudelka widened his net to cover feasts, pilgrimages, celebrations — in fact, any public occasion imbued with ritual from which private moments could be seized.

One such image, already familiar with Chris Steel-Perkins' *about 70 photographs*, is of three men in black suits keeling on a rocky hillside in Ireland. Unlike the sightseers in the background, they are here to pray, and as they lean heavy hands on their blackthorns, they seem almost to be levering themselves out of the ground, lost in a world as private as that of the Rumanian carter and his horse.

Another haunting photograph, this time from Portugal, shows a man, a woman and a child in a whitewashed room. In the middle ground and to the right, the man holds his hat, staring at the distorted shadow of his head falling on the diagonal of the wall opposite. Wrapped in darkness, the woman whose torso intrudes into the right bottom corner seems to smile at the child; the child's face across from her is the only one clearly illuminated as she looks steadily past the woman. It is a composition of considerable formal sophistication which, once again, achieves a level of dramatic intensity apparently beyond the reach of mere subject manipulation or

arrangement.

Unfortunately, it must be said that Koudelka's latest work, from 1978 to 1982, is frequently disappointing; the hitherto strong sense of unity appears to disintegrate, particularly in a series of minimalist landscapes and images of urban detritus dated Italy 1980. In these and other photographs from the same period, the viewer is suddenly confronted with a disconcerting variety of references to contemporary photographers: echoes of Friedlander, Klein, Gibson, Papageorge and Adams — even a Ray Moore-like Welsh landscape. One's first reaction is that some very strange editing has been at work here, for some prints are extremely weak; what, for example, is one to make of the image of a nondescript field in Portugal dominated by the reflection of the sun in a Land Rover mirror?

The answer is probably to be found in Koudelka's statement to Campbell, presumably composed at about the same time: "I do not like to repeat myself. I want to be open enough to explore all the avenues that I can find. I would like to avoid what I have seen happen to some photographers who have restricted themselves, perhaps unnecessarily, and eventually come to a dead-end".<sup>3</sup> Koudelka is obviously recoiling from the prospect of painting himself into a corner, of finding himself typecast as the recorder — no matter how brilliant — of colourful cultural oddments. The fear is understandable, since photographers are often oddly vulnerable to this typecasting; however, it seems as though excessive exposure to the work of his contemporaries at a fairly advanced point in his own career has so far proved a handicap rather than an impetus, particularly for a man whose previous achievements have been so idiosyncratic.

To be honest, I don't believe too much should be made of this. A photographer who shows no significant evolution over two decades is well on his way to being fossilised, and Koudelka is unlikely to suffer such a fate; if a period of experimentation has resulted in some rather uncertain work, his future work is likely to be all the stronger for it. In the meantime, this is an exhibition to study at length.

1. Bryn Campbell, "Work Photography", London 1981, page 308.  
2. John Szarkowski, Looking at Photographs, New York 1973, page 202.  
3. Campbell, op.cit.

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