

# The New York Times

## Josef Koudelka: Formed by the World

By James Estrin

November 19, 2013, 5:00 am

*Josef Koudelka started his professional life as an engineer in Czechoslovakia and switched to photography in his late 20s. He photographed the Soviet invasion of his country in 1968 and published his seminal book, "Gypsies," in 1975 (a revised and enlarged edition was published by Aperture in 2011).*

*His new book, "Wall: Israeli and Palestinian Landscapes," also published by Aperture, is a result of over three years of photographing the barrier that Israel has built over the past decade with the stated purpose of controlling Palestinian access from the West Bank into Israel. The book came out of a group project, "This Place: Making Images, Breaking Images — Israel and the West Bank," that was organized by the photographer Frédéric Brenner and included Mr. Koudelka and 11 other photographers.*

*Mr. Koudelka, 75, has been a member of Magnum Photos for more than 40 years. He spoke with James Estrin in Paris last week. The conversation has been edited and will run in two parts on Lens, Tuesday and Wednesday.*

**Q:** We met last time in Charlottesville, at Look3.

**A:** I try to do a minimum of interviews and usually I do an interview because I am having a show and I know I have to. Usually it lasts a long time. I don't want to do it quickly, but I want to do it thoroughly.

Whatever I do, essentially, I do for myself. I didn't do "Gypsies" to save Gypsies, because even I know I can't save them. So everything I do for myself. If it helps something, I am very pleased. I go around the world and try to discover what interests me and what has something to do with me. For that reason, I never work for a magazine, I never did any fashion, I never made any publicity. For me, a project must interest me and have something to do with me.

So when this group project came up, I said no, I don't want to participate. First of all, I don't want to get mixed up with Israel because it's very, very complicated and it was not exactly my idea. Secondly, it was a group project and I am very suspicious of group projects because you can control what you do, but you can't control what the others do.

So, I refused to go there.

Frédéric Brenner pushed me to go. He said go for two weeks and have a look. I said I will go on the condition that I pay for my own ticket because I know that I am going to tell you no. I know him very well, since he started to take pictures, and I like him and I think he's an honest man.

I had never been in Israel, and I wanted to know what Israel was about, so I said O.K. And I discovered that it has something to do with me.

For 25 years, and this is my longest photographic project, I have been interested in how contemporary man influences the landscape. I have made 10 books on it.

Then I discovered the wall. I grew up behind a wall so I knew what it was. For me, the good photographer is not the guy who goes on the street for 10 minutes and takes this fantastic picture. The good photographer must create the conditions so that he can be good. I found that the destruction of the landscape is very bad. This is the landscape that had something to do with me.

I didn't really want to get mixed up with this, so I needed to have the guarantee that they would let me do what I wanted. Only after four trips of three weeks each to Israel was I sure that I have the guarantee that I am not going to be used — that I will be given the freedom to do all that I wanted in Israel. And that I can control it, from the beginning to the final product. Only then did I sign the contract.

This was going to be a book and I was going to pick the publisher. If you look at only three of the photos you might not understand what it is all about. The question for me was if I do an exhibition should there be text. I don't need text. There will be a short text in the back like in "Black Triangle."

**Q:** You don't want words because when people think of the wall it's about politics? The wall also has this significance, for you, of living behind the wall in Czechoslovakia.

**A:** What is interesting for me is that I showed these books in Israel and everyone told me this book is not a political book — that this is about man and the place. This book is not about conflict — of course you can take it as you want.

An Israeli poet said to me, "You did something important — you made the invisible visible." He meant that Israelis don't want to see the wall and they don't even want to speak about it. They don't go across it. It is very easy to live in one country, in France or Czechoslovakia, and ignore completely one thing, one important thing, that you want to ignore.

**Q:** The thing that struck me when thinking about the book and thinking about you is that you photograph people who are rootless. In "Exiles" they are people who had to leave home. Gypsies don't have a home or their home may be the next place they go to. To some Palestinians the wall is keeping them from their home.

**A:** I was brought up behind the wall and all my life I wanted to get out, and this is the principle of the wall — you know you can't get out.

**Q:** So it's not just a physical wall?

**A:** Of course it is a physical wall. I hope my book is not about my experience. In my “Black Triangle” book, I am not an ecologist though I am very happy if it is used to help the land. The viewer can take something else out of it.

I don't like picture stories. In fact I think picture stories destroyed all photography. You needed to have a close-up and you needed to do other things and for me I am interested in one picture that tells many different stories to different people. That is to me a sign of the good picture.

We all see through our experiences. So because of my experiences, essentially the wall is about not being able to go to the other side.

Every day that I was there I didn't see anything else but the wall, and I can tell you I couldn't stand it longer than three weeks. I was so depressed that I needed to go away.

When I first started to take photographs in Czechoslovakia, I met this old gentleman, this old photographer, who told me a few practical things. One of the things he said was, “Josef, a photographer works on the subject, but the subject works on the photographer.” I have the camera's viewfinder and I am trying to put the world — for the world — in the viewfinder. But in the same time the world is forming me.

**Q:** You didn't do assignment work because you didn't want other people to control what you do or tell you how to do it.

**A:** I did 25 or 26 dummies of the book. The work is done only after 1,000 possibilities you come to the one that must be done this way and not differently.

**Q:** It seems like it is of a whole. You said the wall fits in your search for individual freedom when you were younger. Which is ...

**A:** I think it is not only about the wall, my book is about the wall and the Israel and Palestinian landscape. You have this divided country and these people who react certain ways to these conditions.

For me, Palestinian or Israeli, I look at you for who you are. When I left Czechoslovakia people asked me: “Are you a Communist? Are you opposed to communism? Are you an anarchist?” How you label it doesn't mean much to me.

We have a divided country and each of two groups of people tries to defend themselves. The one that can't defend itself is the landscape. I call what is going on in this most holy landscape, which is most holy for a big part of humanity, is the crime against the landscape. As there exists crimes against humanity there should exist the crime against the landscape.

I am principally against destruction — and what's going on is a crime against the landscape that is enormous in one of the most important landscapes in the world.

**Q:** You said that you photograph for yourself — it's nice if other people see other things in your pictures but you photograph for yourself. I've come to realize that for me photographing is really about the process — the product will take care of itself. The photograph will come out right if the process is right.

**A:** I was never really interested in publishing my photographs. I was never interested, but now I am changing.

In the past if somebody had come to me and said, "I'll give you money to photograph on the condition that you will not publish your photographs," I would have accepted without any question. But if he would say, "I want to destroy your photographs," I would have said no. For me the essence is important.

I am not this guy who wants to change the world — of course I would be happy if it helped. But I remember when I published my Gypsy book I felt like a prostitute because suddenly anyone who has money could buy it.

I wanted to choose the people who I wanted to show the photographs to. This was a deformation from Czechoslovakia because I knew that my photographs didn't have importance there.

(He laughs.) I couldn't help my Gypsies. If I was only going to be photographing Gypsies I was going to run into problems from the government, because they didn't want much talk about the Gypsies.

I have this deformation, from this Czech period when I was growing up, in many different ways. It goes even to the language. I don't believe what people say. What was written or what you heard — the contrary was true.

For me what photographers say about their photos doesn't have any importance. For me it is just enough to look at the pictures. Many times — for the boring pictures — people have to say so many things about them to show you there is something to them when many times there is nothing.

**Q:** So if you do this for yourself, what is the satisfaction then? You do it for yourself just to see these things that you want to see?

**A:** I told you that I am changing. Of course I don't have any illusion about this book that it will change anything. I am just showing what I saw. That's all.

**Q:** What I am wondering, is it the aesthetic pleasure — the artistic pleasure of putting something together?

**A:** I never use the explanation of "art," as a matter of fact every time there is the Magnum meeting and they start to talk about art I say: "Can we eliminate from the annual meeting the word art? Let's just talk about photography. What is this art?"

*Correction: The post originally referred to “the Israeli-built wall that separates the Palestinian West Bank and Israel.” It should have referred to the barrier that Israel has built over the past decade with the stated purpose of controlling Palestinian access from the West Bank into Israel. But rather than running along the pre-1967 boundary between Israel and the West Bank, much of it cuts through West Bank territory.*

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# The New York Times

## Josef Koudelka: A Restless Eye

By James Estrin

November 20, 2013, 5:00 am

*Lens on Tuesday published the first installment of a two-part interview with the legendary Czech photographer Josef Koudelka. He is perhaps best known for his photographs of the Soviet invasion of his country in 1968 and his seminal book, "Gypsies." His new book, "Wall: Israeli and Palestinian Landscapes," published by Aperture, is a result of almost four years of photographing the barrier that Israel has built over the past decade with the stated purpose of controlling Palestinian access from the West Bank into Israel. The book came out of a group project, "This Place: Making Images, Breaking Images — Israel and the West Bank," that was organized by the photographer Frédéric Brenner and included Mr. Koudelka and 11 other photographers.*

*Mr. Koudelka, 75, has been a member of Magnum Photos for more than 40 years. He spoke with James Estrin in Paris last week. The conversation has been edited.*

**Q:** Outside of photography, who or what are your influences?

**A:** Listen, I have never had any hero in my life or in photography. I just travel, I look and everything influences me. Everything influences me. I am quite different now than I was 40 years ago. For 40 years I have been traveling. I never stay in one country more than three months. Why? Because I was interested in seeing, and if I stay longer I become blind.

I became what I am from how I was born, but also what photography made from me. Other people ask me, "Are you still Czech or are you French?" I don't know who I am — people who see me might say who I am. I am the product of all this continuous traveling, but I know where I come from.

It is not my village where I was born, but a few kilometers to the south which is South Moravia, because there is the best songs and the best music there. If these songs and the music came from this land, then I have to have come from there too.

**Q:** You have said that you don't like to plan. (He shows a highly detailed color coded calendar and notebook.) Wow!

**A.** So I plan. I plan. I know where I want to go and I know what I want to do. At the same time I like to be open enough to forget it. For me, the trip is essential.

**Q.** I don't know that much about engineering, but I am wondering how much that affected your photography. Are there any similarities? Or is that something you left behind?

**A.** I am very happy that I finished being an engineer. I love airplanes as much as photography, but after doing the profession for seven years I realized what I can do and what I can't do. I realized what sort of an engineer I am, and I didn't have the aspiration to become the big boss of something. And I started photographing. I was 30 years old and I realized that I didn't want to die when I was 30 years old. I wanted to go farther.

I am still trying to find how far I can go in photography. I realize the limitations. Most photographers die when they are 40 years old. I might be dead myself by now. That's for other people to say. But I am still interested in taking photographs and I am still interested in life. I am still going on because I don't put so many limitations on myself.

Take for example Bresson and Klein. As Henri started, he finished. With the exception that at the beginning he was the best. He still took some excellent photographs. And Klein used the wide-angle lens throughout his life.

When I was in Prague, I photographed the Gypsies with an Exacta camera and a 25-millimeter Flektogon f4 lens. I shot inside mostly at a 30th of a second or less. I bulk-loaded this East German 400 ASA movie film – and pushed it as far as it could go in a hot developer. Sometimes I left it in overnight. Sometimes to 3200 ASA.

There was such a density of negative that when I made my first exhibition of the Gypsies I made a second set and made a copy negative of it so everything that was in the Magnum archive was printed from the copy negative.

When I understood that I don't need any more wide-angle lens photos – that on the contrary there's a repetition coming – I bought two Leicas and started to use a 35-millimeter lens and a 50-millimeter lens. I knew that the techniques will change the vision — if you change the technique.

I think it is also the training from Czechoslovakia that I appreciate the freedom. You want to keep this feeling of freedom, and you want to go farther, so you break the rule, you destroy the house, and you start again.



Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

**Q:** I think one of the things that I loved about photography when I started was that you do it by yourself.

**A:** That's exactly the case. You buy your camera, and you buy your film, and everything is on you. This is the freedom photography gives you, but it is also a big challenge because you have to handle it.

**Q:** Also photography is always different. Every time you move to another country you are reborn. You are seeing something else.

**A:** That's what I say. The writer Bruce Chatwin, in a book about aborigines in Australia, called "The Songlines," says there are a few rules so that aborigines can survive in a hostile country. The first was to stay in one place means suicide. Second, your country is the place where you don't put questions to yourself anymore. Your home is the place where you leave from and in a period of crisis you must formulate a way to escape. Also, you should keep good relationships with your neighbors.

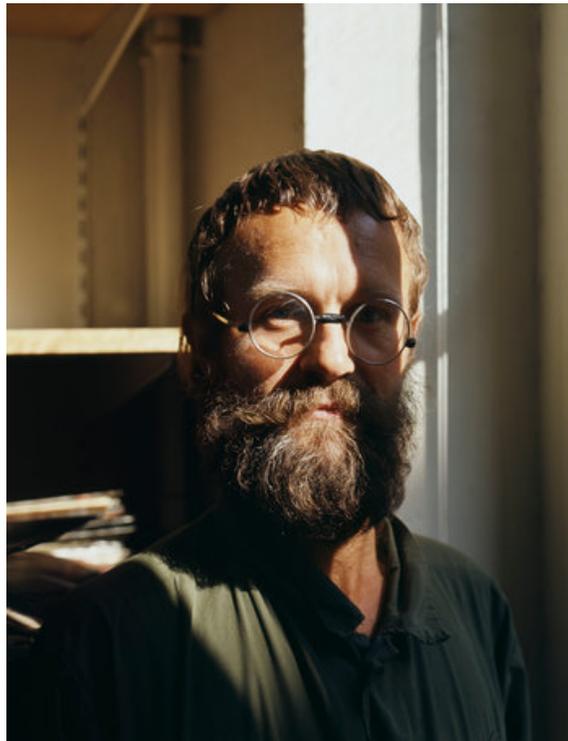
**Q:** You were talking about the format of the camera influencing you. You've been shooting digital sometimes. How does that influence you?

**A:** For me, the eye is important. Of course, the technique you use can influence you.

For example, shooting this panorama film camera complicates my life enormously because you have four frames on 120 film and in one day you shoot 20 rolls and that's already \$200. So you must have somebody who gives money and then they expect that you finish something.

I was using this Fuji panoramic — but the problem was everyone stopped developing the film. You can't get 220 film anymore and you needed to carry about 35 kilograms extra. I went to Leica and they did one camera for me that was digital panoramic, which is this S2 camera, and they make two lines and set it on black and white. I made four trips with it together with the film camera. In the last two trips I realized I was taking more pictures with this Leica and I am enjoying it more. The result is very comparable. The lens was exactly the same.

The principal difference is first of all you don't have to carry the film, and you don't need to process it and you don't have to carry all the weight and you don't have to find the money. The digital is much more precise and I have more control of the focus, the depth of the focus, and I can photograph much closer. It gives me more possibilities.



The photographer Josef Koudelka. 1974.

**Q:** Other than the practical elements of carrying and developing film, was there any difference between digital and film?

**A:** For me it is the same. Only I enjoy digital more. I don't carry a computer. I come inside in the evening, and until 12 o'clock I look at the screen on the back of the camera, and I eliminate.

Landscape photography is fantastic. It's not by chance that as they get older many photographers start with the landscape. There are certain things you have to do to photograph people — you have to be able to run. If you photograph people, all of the time you are running after something and you are losing all the time. With landscapes you are waiting all the time. It's much more relaxing.

I'm 75 now so for that reason — discovering digital landscapes at 75 — I am saying, "Viva la revolucion."

I want to show you this little book I bought 20 years ago in Czechoslovakia. It is the speech of Chief Seattle to the president of the United States in 1854. It is so beautiful. It applies to Israel.

He says the land doesn't belong to the people — it is the people who belong to the land. The land is the mother and what is happening to the mother is going to happen to the son too. This is the question about selling the land. He said how can you sell your mother — how can you sell the air — and he said if you are spitting on your land you are spitting on your mother.

**Q:** What are you working on now?

**A:** I have a project on archaeological sites that I have been working on since 1991. I have visited more than 200 Greek and Roman sites in 19 countries and have three more years left. This year I exhibited it in Marseille, and the problem is that all of the money from it went to the film and to produce it. I did not make one centime.

But now with the digital camera I have the possibility that I can just pay my ticket and pick up the camera and go where I want. I have friends everywhere who let me stay with them. So I have three years more and then I want to make a really important exhibition and two books. One will be a book with text.

Since the beginning of photography everybody has photographed these places, but nobody has ever visited almost all of them.

**Q:** What did you learn from visiting all these places and spending all this time thinking about the archaeology sites and the history of man?

**A** That nothing is permanent.

Nothing is permanent — that's also what I learned from the Gypsies. Bresson used to tell me that your problem is that you don't think about the future, and that's exactly what I learned from the Gypsies. Not to worry much about the future. And I learned that to be alive I don't need much. So I never worried about money because I knew in the past if I needed the money I borrowed it so I didn't lose the time.

And time is the only thing you have in your life, and if you are getting older you feel it a little more. But I felt that all my life.

**Q:** I know you don't like doing interviews and I understand why you think talking about photography is often banal.

**A:** Now I have to make this interview regarding Israel and the wall and that's where a good journalist can help you. To put a question to force you to answer — so you have the time to think about it.

When I was planning to go to Israel, Frédéric [Brenner] prepared for me meetings with philosophers and rabbis and I said: "Listen, I went through all this in Communist Czechoslovakia. Before going to Yugoslavia, they said you have to learn what you are going to see."

I said I get my knowledge through my eyes and if you look enough and give enough time, even if you do not have a fantastic brain, which I don't think much about my brain, you will get to certain conclusions and I think I get to the conclusions. I didn't want to talk to anybody before going there.

I am grateful to Frédéric Brenner that he pushed me to do it though because it made me richer as a human being.

**Q:** The wall itself is incredibly ugly. There is nothing aesthetically pleasing about it.

**A:** I can imagine that somebody who is in engineering when he sees this wall might say this is really good engineering. I like airplanes and I am very emotional, but some of these war planes are pretty, beautiful, yet they are so terrible. I think that's the conflict. Beauty is very relative and it depends on each person and the beauty is everywhere and the beauty is even in the tragedy.

*Part 1 of the interview with Josef Koudelka was published Tuesday on Lens.*

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