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ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Vagabond Who Sees the World Starkly

By Vicki Goldberg

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AT the Rencontres d'Arles, the French photography festival, David Douglas Duncan, the Life magazine photographer, was on the phone.

"Did you see the Koudelka shows?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Don't bother with anything else," he said. "All the other shows look second-rate in comparison."

There are other shows worth bothering with, but in fact the photographs by Josef Koudelka merely take the breath away. There is so much material, covering 40 years of work, that the photographs are mounted in four different places in this town in the south of France.

Mr. Koudelka, born in Czechoslovakia in 1938, has an eye for drama and the darkness of the spirit, for loneliness and exile, for the hallucinatory moment: a man in handcuffs walks toward us, watched by a long file of villagers; a broken statue of Lenin lies on its back, gliding downriver on a barge, pointing toward the future.

Mr. Koudelka detects heart-stopping revelations where there seems to be nothing, nothing: a tree rudely cuts into the atmosphere, tractor tracks rupture the earth's skin. He has led an unlikely life, much of it lived, by his own choice, on the move, without a home or possessions.

"I have two shirts," he told me in Arles. "Two years ago I bought another two. I haven't touched them. They're army surplus. I have one trousers for one year, one shoes for one year, one jacket for two years, two socks, and for travel a good sleeping bag."

He prefers to live like the people he photographs. "What I don't have," he said, "I don't need."

Born in a village where, he said, everyone was a tailor, he got interested in photography at about 12 and began taking pictures seriously while studying aeronautical engineering at the Technical University in Prague. He acquired an old Rolleiflex and was offered a show for the first pictures he ever took with it; only then did he learn how to enlarge.

He was soon making photographs of theater performances, right onstage among the actors, during rehearsals. He once said that this experience had taught him to see the world as theater, and that photographing Gypsies a little later was theater, too. "The difference," he

added, "was that the play had not been written and there was no director; there were only actors."

Mr. Koudelka stayed in the Gypsy camps while photographing. "If some of my pictures smelled," he said, "people wouldn't look at them." But the Gypsies looked out for him. "I slept sometimes in the cottages and sometimes outside because I wanted to see the sky," he said. "To make sure no one hurt me, some of them would sleep next to me. If they found a pencil, they would bring it to me, thinking maybe one of the children had stolen it."

The Gypsy pictures are dark, brooding, disjunctive, tinged with tenderness and sorrow. Years later, he said, he met some Gypsies on a pilgrimage and told them he'd done a book on their people: "We know," they said. "We call you Iconar. We have the book. It's been cut apart and put in a chapel. We pray for the people in them." "

For seven years, until 1967, Mr. Koudelka worked as an aeronautical engineer. Though he liked planes a lot, he left them. "I realized my limitations and the limitations of the profession," he said. "You realize you're a little part of something that you can't influence much. My interest in photography was growing. It was time for a change."

He thought a moment. "Czechoslovakia forced us to choose a profession we really loved, because we couldn't make money," he said. "When I left Czechoslovakia, it was more difficult to keep this freedom."

He was determined to keep his independence, which partly accounts for how he's lived.

In 1968, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia, he took photographs in the streets for days.

"I didn't feel any hate for the Russians," he recalled. "I felt sorry for the guys on the tanks. They were young men like me. They didn't want to be there. The tragedy was that I was living in the same system. I could have been sitting one night in a tank in Warsaw or Budapest."

The invasion instantly united his country. "The thieves in Czechoslovakia, after '68, said they weren't going to steal anymore because the police had a lot of work to do. It gave us a common cause." He added: "It was a tragic time, but I'm happy I could live through it. I felt that everything that could happen in my life was happening during these 10 days."

His pictures were smuggled out of Czechoslovakia and shown to Elliott Erwitt, then the head of the Magnum photo agency. Mr. Koudelka was awarded the Robert Capa gold medal anonymously, to protect him; he didn't even know he'd won it. A year after the invasion, Magnum arranged worldwide, anonymous publication of these photographs.

Mr. Koudelka was in London photographing a Czech theater troupe. "One Sunday in London I saw my pictures in the London Sunday Times," he said. "I was afraid I'd be in trouble."

Once back in Prague, he got in touch with Magnum. "They arranged a grant to photograph Gypsies for three months outside of Czechoslovakia," he said.