

The depiction of life as an exile: *Exiles* by Josef Koudelka.

Excerpt from: *Existential Exposures The Manifestation of Existential Motifs within the Art Photograph* © Panos Kokkinias 2009

The foreword of Czeslaw Milosz in Josef Koudelka's *Exiles* (1988) ends with an anecdote about a refugee from war-torn Europe:

In a travel agency, undecided as to what continent and what state would be far off enough and safe enough, for a while he was pensively turning a globe with his finger, then asked, 'don't you have something else?'¹

Although humour may be a relief from worry, all it can do is lighten our mood. One smiles with the query of the refugee but the smile is a bitter one. For his limited and unattractive choices remind us of the condition of all humankind. Koudelka's *Exiles* explores similar territory, but there is no humour to relieve it. It takes the condition of exile to describe, in a broader sense, the forlorn wandering of humankind.



Fig. 39 *Untitled*²

In order to depict this *periplanissis*³ he adapts his method to his quest. Koudelka becomes a wanderer himself. Employing the practices of documentary photography, he captures whatever he encounters as it appears before him, at the moment of its occurrence. Thus he depends on what happens around him and he has first to find a situation that interests him. This dependence obliges him to keep returning to the

¹ Czeslaw Milosz, 'On Exile', in Josef Koudelka, *Exiles*, Aperture, New York, 1988, p 9

² Picture from an edition with photographs from the making of *Ulysses' Gaze* by Theo Angelopoulos. Josef Koudelka, *Periplanissis: Following Ulysses' Gaze*, Organization for Cultural Capital of Europe 1997, Thessalonica, 1995, no page numbers

³ Periplanissis is the Greek word for wandering.

same places and to take photographs all the time, starting in the early morning and stopping ‘only when there is no more light’.⁴

In his foreword Milosz writes about rhythm and repetition, which ‘enable us to form habits and to accept the world as familiar’. But this familiarity stops, he says, when one is ‘transplanted into alien surroundings’. In exile one is ‘oppressed by the anxiety of indefiniteness, by insecurity’.⁵ Likewise, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus describes human life as a path of rhythmic repetition that is easily followed most of the time. He says that the world is familiar as long as it can be explained, ‘even with bad reasons’.⁶ But when the question why arises, bad reasons can no longer hold up a stage set constructed from illusions. Familiarity ends and repetition is metamorphosed: the comforting routine becomes a comic dumb show. This is when man feels like an alien, a stranger. Camus observes that this particular *exile* is without remedy since man is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.

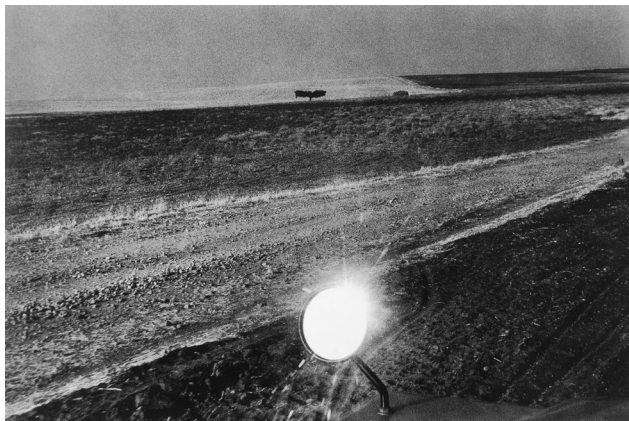


Fig. 40 Portugal, 1979

The world can be seen through the eyes of an exile by a sudden twist of perception. When for instance a tiny detail, such as a car mirror reflecting a sunbeam, arrests the attention, magnetizes the focus, sucks in all concentration. All life is condensed in that brief momentous experience. At such a moment, unconsciously, as in a revelation, one discovers that things exist. Their properties are not enough to explain the reason they exist. The *why* remains unanswered and thus existence starts to appear absurd.

⁴ Koudelka interviewed by Frank Horvat in March 1987, Charles Martin, trans, posted on Horvat’s site: http://www.horvatland.com/pages/entrevues/05-koudelka-en_en.htm

⁵ Czeslaw Milosz, ‘On Exile’, in Josef Koudelka, *Exiles*, op cit, p 7

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, op cit, p 13



Fig. 41 *England, 1976*



Fig. 42 *Italy, 1984*

Camus writes that ‘at any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face’.⁷ The first picture in *Exiles* might be one of these moments: a man is about to walk down a street with no pavements and empty of any other human presence or sign of activity. He is confronted with a disheartening repetition of identical grey buildings. He looks away from the direction in which he is heading as if he wishes to avoid it, but the way he is framed, or entrapped in the picture, suggests that there is no other direction to take. Another man lying huddled on a bench has probably accepted that there is no way out. He seems attached to the inhospitable bench, and in his sleep his frozen face looks no more alive than the cold marble. In *Exiles* the feeling of absurdity and a view of the world as if seen through the eyes of an exile are inescapable at almost every turn of the page.

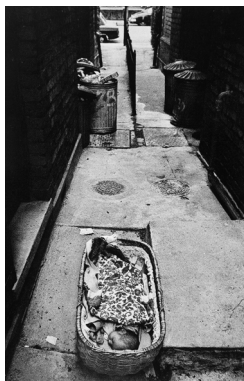


Fig. 43 *England, 1969*



Fig. 44 *England, 1973*

In Koudelka’s work exile is not just the physical phenomenon of being away from a homeland. A baby sleeping in the middle of a narrow alley, left alone among brimful dustbins, suggests that life is a state of exile from the moment one is born. In that

⁷ Ibid, p 17

sense, the sad couple in the deserted landscape is a modern version of the archetypal exclusion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. These two pictures are not included in *Exiles*; however this only confirms that Koudelka's interest in this theme was a thread running through all his work.

As an illustration of this, in *Gypsies* (1975) we see Koudelka's version of *The Family of Man*.⁸ A father sleeps bent on his chair while his unattended children occupy themselves randomly in the room. Everything seems dragged out of kilter with a slightly but crucially tilted frame. The light bursting into the scene only reinforces its gloominess. It is not a coincidence that before *Exiles* Koudelka worked for a long time photographing the gypsies. The wandering of the nomad served him well in the articulation of what seemed always to be his major interest: 'the prevailing circumstance that encloses us'.⁹



Fig. 45 *Cierny Balog*, 1967



Fig. 46 *Portugal*, 1976

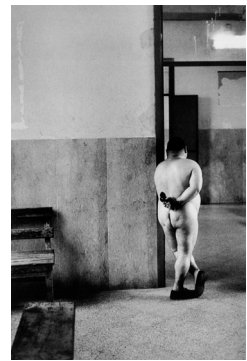


Fig. 47 *Italy*, 1983

Due to this intense and specific interest, everything that Koudelka photographs becomes an evocation of this circumstance. Within this context a disfigured man standing naked by a door has the air of a displaced man. His exile is a sentence passed on him by life. A one armed-bather on a Portuguese beach is not just a handicapped swimmer. His silent commiseration with the crying boy evokes his own grief for a state of wellbeing that he has lost forever. This is 'as far as Koudelka will go in depicting vacation'.¹⁰

⁸ Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955

⁹ Josef Koudelka, *Gypsies*, introduction by John Szarkowski, Aperture, New York, 1975, p 5

¹⁰ Max Kozloff, 'Koudelka's Theater of Exile' in *Lone Visions Crowded Frames*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque NM, 1994, p 154

But this picture is also an example of how far Koudelka can go in terms of the skilful handling of his camera. As in many other photographs, he welds together two or more adjacent scenarios in one picture to create a new meaning. This rigorous use of the frame happens through the integration of the camera into the photographer's anatomy. Koudelka does not invent a new genre but he pushes the one that he follows to its limits. He claims, and it is hard for one to disagree when looking at these pictures, that he 'can almost photograph without looking through the viewfinder'.¹¹

At the beginning of his career Koudelka photographed theatre plays. This is probably one reason why his work is 'marked by a sort of theatrical organization of reality'.¹² Time in many of his photographs seems to have stopped and even the buildings often look like stage sets. Koudelka's subjects act like players on a stage, unwittingly performing in dramas devised on the spot.¹³ In *Exiles* the stage set has collapsed. The theatre is ruined and the actors roam across the wreckage.

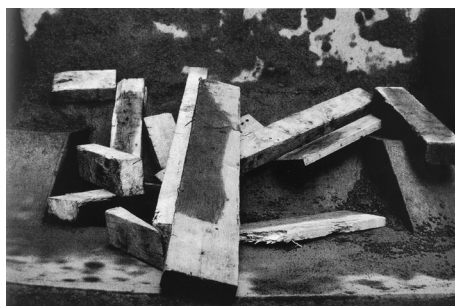


Fig. 48 England, 1976

Fig. 49 Switzerland, 1979

Fig. 50 Greece, 1981

¹¹ Koudelka interviewed by Frank Horvat, op cit

¹² Robert Delpire quoted by Max Kozloff, 'Koudelka's Theater of Exile' in *Lone Visions Crowded Frames*, op cit, p 154. Koudelka himself attests to this view: 'Over the last ten years I have been continually re-shooting real-life situations in much the same way as I originally worked in the theater... I know the stage, I know the play and I know the actors. Sometimes they have an off-day, sometimes they are all their best.' Koudelka quoted by Allan Porter in 'Josef Koudelka A Monograph', *Camera* #8 August 1979, Lucerne, 1979, p 5

¹³ Max Kozloff, 'Koudelka's Theater of Exile' in *Lone Visions Crowded Frames*, op cit, p 154

The inhabitants of Koudelka's cosmos seem unreal, aloof, lost in utter detachment, showing a similarity to the characters in the work of Samuel Beckett. An expatriate himself, Beckett usually spoke of people in an abstract space with which they cannot enter into contact. They perform an absurd routine while waiting for something that never finally happens.

Koudelka visualises this futile waiting in a picture where a group of old women sit miserably around a table in a dull Irish café. Two of them look with anticipation at something that we cannot see outside the frame. Their age, their boredom and the concern in their stares evoke the anxiety of Vladimir and Estragon as they wait for Godot. If Beckett's plays constitute a Theatre of the Absurd, the bizarre group of four men urinating on the walls of an improvised alfresco pissoir, entitles Koudelka to be known as the Photographer of the Absurd. As in this picture, the people in *Exiles* are often photographed from behind, or in silhouette, and this enhances the sense of alienation that pervades the book.



Fig. 51 *Ireland, 1971*



Fig. 52 *Ireland, 1976*

It is also worth noting that in *Exiles* absurdity is not exclusive to the human condition. In eleven out of the total of sixty-five pictures in the book, the protagonist is an animal.



Fig. 53 *Spain*, 1976

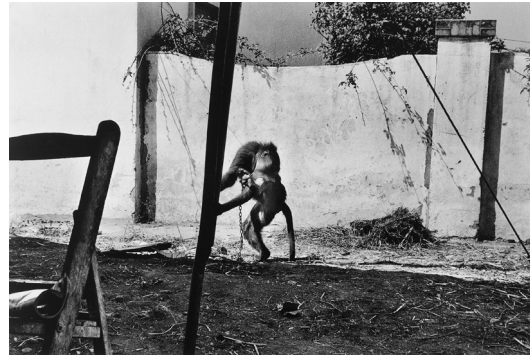


Fig. 54 *Spain*, 1978

In a variation on the first picture, at another street corner, from a similar angle offering a view of the street receding into the background, Koudelka photographs again an entrance to the absurd. Only this time, instead of a man, it is a goat that is about to enter the scene. The sun illuminates the animal as the shutter catches its leg in mid-air. Its hesitant step reminds us of a traveller arriving at an unfamiliar place.

Turning again to the beginning of the book, just after the man who enters the absurd street and before the pissing ensemble, a chained monkey is trying to break its leash. In its desperate attempt it seems to be biting its own flesh. Seen alone, this picture does not necessarily, or only, read as a metaphor for an inexplicable, undesired and inescapable condition. But placed in this sequence and context, it suggests just such a condition. Szarkowski writes in the epilogue of Garry Winogrand's book *The Animals* (1969) that Winogrand 'sees and sets down with acuity the flickering meanings that illuminate the menagerie we perform in'.¹⁴ The statement might also apply to Koudelka, but in his case the absence of the comical undertone found in Winogrand suggests a very conscious focus on the unbearable *heaviness* of being. This deliberation is what makes *Exiles* one of the most cohesive photographic bodies of work on the human condition. An expatriate himself, Koudelka is able to project his disquietude with a visceral authenticity onto any living creature.

Under a grey sky, a group of seagulls fly over a dark sea. One of them is close enough to be examined in detail. It seems to have an almost human frown; it looks severe and preoccupied. A dog tied to a fence stands on its two legs in an effort to find an escape

¹⁴ Garry Winogrand, *The Animals*, afterward by John Szarkowski, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969, p 48

from an unidentified site redolent of abandonment and deterioration. An upturned turtle lies stranded in the midst of an obscure and barren landscape.



Fig. 55 *Scotland, 1977*



Fig. 56 *Spain, 1975*



Fig. 57 *Turkey, 1984*

The presence of these disoriented, grim and desperate animals has a double function in the book. They serve as surrogates for human beings and at the same time they signify that the whole universe, not just the human one, is disordered and chaotic. This view is enhanced by the depiction of disorderly urban sites and unattractive rural areas. It is worth noting that, moving from *Gypsies* to *Exiles* to *Chaos* (1999), these unreal, empty landscapes gradually replace the individual that was initially central to Koudelka's compositions. Their depressing vacancy offers no escape from the feeling of loss.¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, who is considered a precursor of existentialist thinking, asserted that the scientific assumption of an orderly universe is for the most part a useful fiction, and Koudelka offers visual affirmation of this view.

¹⁵ Max Kozloff, 'Koudelka's Theater of Exile' in *Lone Visions Crowded Frames*, op cit, p 155

Koudelka's intensely dark vision is probably related to his constant awareness of death. In an interview he states that when he wakes up in the morning he reminds himself that this maybe the last day of his life.¹⁶ This explains the frequent presence of death in his work. In both *Gypsies* and *Exiles* we see pictures from funerals.



Fig. 58 *Jarabina*, 1963



Fig. 59 *Rumania*, 1968

In the first case the relatives gather silently around the dead body. In the second, as the body is about to be buried, they mourn amidst an extraordinary choreography of gestures. In both cases their witnessing brings an awareness of the certainty of death, an awareness that we usually suppress and fritter away in insignificant distractions. Koudelka's sustained awareness is comparable to Heidegger's doctrine for a conscious 'being-toward-death', which can help man to actively grasp his life and achieve an authentic existence. Heidegger, who defines man as the being that knows he is going to die, suggests this consciousness as an answer to the meaninglessness of existence. Similar antidotes¹⁷ prescribed by other existential philosophers expose a major difference between the function of these philosophies and the existential probing of Koudelka. Although the latter has engaged in a very particular way of living (for instance sleeping out in the open for most of his life) he has not been able to suggest solutions to the problems that he depicts in his work. This incapacity is inherent in the medium that he uses. Although photography is able to examine and sometimes even hazard conclusions, it cannot, for better or worse, attempt to offer any consoling resolution. A picture of a dead crow that hangs absurdly from an

¹⁶ Koudelka interviewed by Frank Horvat, op cit

¹⁷ Sartre maintains that life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal, but creates a system of thought based on freedom, responsibility and choice, which tries to challenge the consequences of his own analysis of human existence. Camus suggests a fight of pyrrhic integrity in a continual defeat.

endless string is not only a sad and unanswerable mystery; it is a stark fact that contradicts verbal consolations.



Fig. 60 *Ireland, 1978*

Today, for many reasons, the number of people leaving their homeland is increasing. Besides wars and political persecution, this contemporary phenomenon is also due to economic necessity. The global restructuring of trade, markets and businesses forces people to search for better luck in foreign lands. Either they are poor and have no choice other than to use small boats, setting sail into the unknown, or they are wealthier and book a plane ticket, knowing the destination where they will try to improve their working conditions and income. To these we can add the people who, attracted by industrial centres, leave their rural districts and become the new and disoriented inhabitants of the urban landscape. ‘Alienation becomes a predicament of too many human beings to be considered an affliction of a special category.’¹⁸ The increase in their numbers gives rise to the image of an exiled humanity. This is the image that Koudelka’s work presents. The loss of orientation depicted in it cannot be resolved with a compass. We are free to choose our own direction and must create anew our own North, East, West, and South.

¹⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, ‘On Exile’, in Josef Koudelka, *Exiles*, op cit, p 8