

CROOKED TIMBER

W. Eugene Smith, Josef Sudek, and humanist photography
By Stuart Franklin



A footnote in John Banville's *Prague Pictures* stopped me short. The book, which celebrates the work of the late Czech photographer Josef Sudek, argues that no other son of Prague "managed to capture so movingly the essence of the place." The footnote, however, presents an altogether chillier appraisal. It refers to a meeting between Banville and Henri Cartier-Bresson,

the French photojournalist, who concluded that Sudek's photographs were "not human enough."

I became transfixed by this remark—a judgment revealing, I felt, a narrow view of what it is to explore humanity through photography. I asked Banville for more context. In 2003, he had gone to Paris to interview Cartier-Bresson for the *Irish Times*. They met in "a rather ghastly

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Chinese restaurant ... off the rue de Rivoli." Throughout the interview Banville parried what he has called Cartier-Bresson's "blithe mulishness": the remark about Sudek, he told me, "was just that—a remark. I had brought up Sudek's name. Cartier-Bresson dismissed him as not human enough, and passed on. I tried to get him to elaborate, but he wouldn't. The subject was closed."

Banville was himself "taken aback by almost everything Cartier-Bresson had to say." On the other hand, "he was perfectly charming, courtly, sincere, except on the subject of photography, and on this he was, frankly, deluded, or deluding himself."

Sudek's aesthetic approach was markedly different from that of Cartier-Bresson. Although he rarely photographed people, Sudek claimed he had "no particular leaning toward the geometrical, the rectangular, the all-too-clearly defined: I prefer the living, the vital, and life is very different from geometry: simplified security has no place in life."

Cartier-Bresson, by contrast, was quite interested in the geometry of his photographs, which, though filled with people, are often constructed according to the rules of the golden ratio. For Banville, Cartier-Bresson was "very much in the European humanist tradition, so much so that he tended to forget or discount how much and how often his art was a matter of aesthetic rather than humanist concerns. He was the great geometer among photographers."

Cartier-Bresson's remark about Sudek, flip as it may have been, invites the question: Is humanist photography contingent on a human subject?

The term "humanist" as a description of documentary practice gained popularity in

Europe in the 1950s, especially in postwar France, where photographers like Robert Doisneau, Izis, Willy Ronis, and Cartier-Bresson had regular features in photo-heavy magazines such as *Paris Match*, which sold a million copies a week. These magazines demanded street photography that reflected a positive image of "Frenchness," pictures of daily life that centered the human subject. Humanist photography was a construct designed to glue together a splintered nation.

In the United States, W. Eugene Smith was the standard-bearer of humanism. Smith's work, like that of many acknowledged American humanist photographers—for example, Margaret Bourke-White, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange—had a deeply reformist agenda. Hine's work supported efforts to abolish child labor, and both Bourke-White and Lange produced books in the late 1930s that highlighted the inequities of tenant farming and the impact of the Great Depression. At the time, these reports or stories were described as "human documents." As William Stott pointed out in his book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, "The adjective 'human' recurs throughout thirties literature as a synonym for emotional or touching or heartfelt."

Smith's "Nurse Midwife," published in *Life* in 1951, was one such human document. The article and picture story focused on Maude Callen and made her an overnight celebrity. Smith's work led to the construction of an expansive new clinic in South Carolina.

Echoing Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag called this and similar projects, including the



1955 Family of Man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which closed with a photograph by Smith, "sentimental humanism." She contrasted it with the "anti-humanism" of Diane Arbus, whose photographs suggested a world "in which everybody is an alien, hopelessly isolated, immobilized in mechanical, crippled identities and relationships."

The philosopher Kate Soper has proposed a definition of humanism that is less assertively anthropocentric than the one that guided Smith and his contemporaries: "[T]he relationship of 'humanity' to 'nature' is to be understood as a totality: the world is what it is as a result of its being lived in and transformed by humanity, while humanity in turn acquires its character through its existence and situation in the world." Humanist photography, viewed in this way, would need to be more inclusive and open to environmental forces.

Jiří Pátek's office at the Moravian Gallery in Brno, in the Czech Republic, looks out over a combination of 1930s functionalist architecture and seventeenth-century Baroque mansions. The view offered a moment of meditation while Pátek, a curator at the gallery, and I waited for his computer to search haltingly through the Josef Sudek archive. "We are a state institution," Pátek said. "There's no money in the budget for equipment." In the basement, where framed prints from Sudek's series *The Window of My Studio* (1940–54) had been ordered out of the depository, things ran more smoothly. I had come to study the prints in detail.

Sudek was born in 1896 in Kolín, thirty-five miles east of Prague, the city where he died in 1976. His father, Václav, a housepainter, succumbed to pneumonia when Sudek was an infant. Twenty years on, while fighting in the First World War, Sudek lost his right arm to friendly fire from an Austrian artillery shell on the Italian Front. "Sudek wouldn't have had the chance to become a photographer had he not been a war veteran," said Pátek. Unable to pursue his planned career as a book-binder, Sudek developed an interest in photography while he convalesced, documenting fellow patients in the hospital ward.

His struggle to overcome pain and disability can be compared to that of Dorothea Lange, who was afflicted with polio, and whose work had what the poet and physician William Carlos Wil-

liams described as a "redemptive vitality." Stubborn and resolute, Sudek continued photographing even after the Nazi occupation of the Czech borderlands in 1938, when to be out with a camera invited suspicion and persecution. Later, he retreated to the inner world of his studio—a wooden shack on a steep hill below Prague Castle.

In *Žít svůj život* (Live Your Life), a 1963 sepia-toned documentary on Sudek by Evald Schorm, the photographer potters about in his garden while wearing a loose-weave wool jacket. For no apparent reason, he wets a small metallic bird, the work of the welder Andrej Bobruška, with a watering can. Indoors, in shuttered-window light, we see dark-room bottles, Sudek's large left hand, photographic prints, a turntable. As the camera pans slowly over the roofs, we hear Sudek's dry whistling.



Photograph by Josef Sudek from his series *The Window of My Studio*
Courtesy the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic © The Estate of Josef Sudek

Left: A photograph of Texas tenant farmers who had been displaced from their land by tractor farming, taken by Dorothea Lange in 1937 while working for the U.S. Farm Security Administration. Courtesy the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Right: A photograph by W. Eugene Smith of nurse-midwife Maude Callen and an apprentice helping a woman deliver her baby, from the series *Nurse Midwife* © Black Star/The Estate of W. Eugene Smith



Photograph by Josef Sudek from his series *The Window of My Studio*
 Courtesy the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic © The Estate of Josef Sudek

As the film continues, Sudek is outside again, tightening the wing nuts on a wooden tripod; he is the embodiment of Sisyphus, hauling a huge camera over his left shoulder up the steep inclines of Prague, and later through woods. His teeth replace the function of his right arm, which is gone from the shoulder down. He uses them to adjust the black cloth that shields him from extraneous light and to cock the camera's shutter. His back is curved, almost hunched. His face, when we see it in close-up, is asymmetrical. The left eye is half shut; the right one is wide open and alert. John Banville wrote that after Sudek took a picture, "He would kneel down on the spot . . . crawl with his camera into a lightless sack and, working by touch, insert a new film."

The protagonist of *The Window of My Studio*, featured in a third of the seventy-five photographs in the series, is a sinuous and stunted apple tree. The tree, which has survived the seasons and the deep shadows of the yard, and has weathered the harsh years of political and economic turmoil, becomes a metaphor for Sudek's misshapen physique. According to Jan Mlčoch, the curator of the Photography Collection at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, there are several hundred versions of this tree in the museum's archive.

A persistent beggar looking in, or a mirrored self-portrait peering out, half-veiled in mist and condensation, the apple tree stamps its presence on us. In one photograph, beads of dew hanging like fruit are held in focus while the tree itself is blurred. In another, an enigmatic reflection, the tree wears what looks like an eye, visible above vases of lungworts, cowslips, and snowdrops.

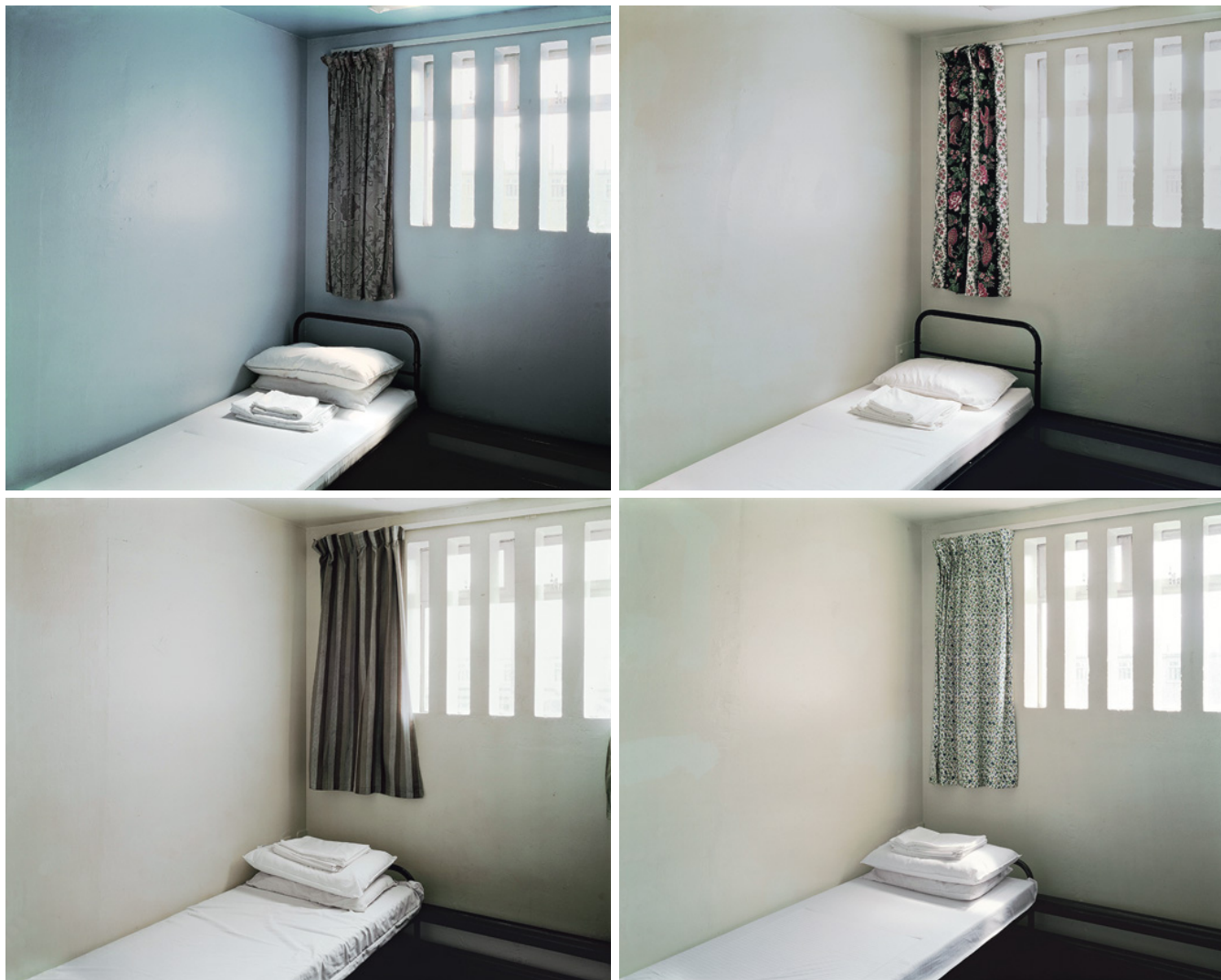
Banville suggested to me that Sudek was "so fascinated by closeted and cluttered interiors that these photographs, these sudden glimpses *out* into the exterior world, seem a break for freedom, an exit into the air and the light." This "break for freedom" seems charged with the spirit of existentialism as humanism—a humanism of freedom and self-definition. Banville has described a later Sudek series, *Vanished Statues* (1952–70), as "stark, austere beautiful studies of crippled trees"



captured in Mionší Forest. "It is perhaps too obvious," Banville added, "to see in the many images he fixed of these maimed giants a composite, covert self-portrait." Sudek called the trees "sleeping giants," adding that he saw in them reminders of people he had lost: "When someone you love dies on you, it bothers you, of course. But after a while you find out that he didn't completely die. Suddenly, you see he's somehow alive in something. We don't know why that is."

In this way, Sudek's trees share something with the men and women photographed by Smith. Jim Hughes, Smith's biographer, wrote of his celebrated image of Tomoko Uemura, a victim of Minimata disease, "if only from his deepest memories, Gene surely must have experienced an instant of recogni-

"Chez Mondrian," a photograph by André Kertész © Cleveland Museum of Art/
 James Parmelee Fund/Bridgeman Images/Estate of André Kertész/Higher Pictures



tion when he made the exposure. . . . It was as if he'd found the ultimate image of love—contorted though it may have become—for which he's been searching his entire life." Sontag compared the photograph to Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

There was, in the photograph, something of a reflected self-portrait, an image that in its depth spoke of Smith's anguished life, which was forever thrown off course by his father's suicide. Hughes wrote: "Gene found the outward expression of the unnameable pain he had felt deep within himself for most of his life."

An enlarged understanding of humanist practice might also encompass other work without a human subject, such as the landscapes of despoliation captured by William Eggleston, Richard Misrach, and Sophie Ristelhueber, and sometimes described as "the toxic sublime." Another candidate for this reimagined canon is André Kertész's 1926 photograph of a vase of painted white flowers in Piet Mondrian's hallway, which

seems to invoke the character of the painter, even in his absence. It was included in Cornell Capa's exhibition *The Concerned Photographer* and in a book of the same name, published in 1968, in which Kertész explained: "The spirit in his studio was absolutely Mondrian's spirit. His style was cool, static and exact. Everything was white, and for cutting this cold atmosphere he used an artificial flower in a vase. He had painted the flower white because the white went with the apartment. When you entered the studio this was the first thing you saw. As you see, I always walked in the spirit of the people."

The photographer Shannon Jensen documented the people's spirit in her project *A Long Walk*, about refugees along the Sudanese border. Jensen noticed the shoes: "The refugees were wearing an incredible array of worn-down, misshapen, patched-together shoes. Each pair provided a silent testimony to the arduous journey. Each detail revealed the persistence and ingenuity of their owners and the diversity of the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children brought together by tragic circumstance." Jensen said that her aim was to



"honor the resilience, determination, and perseverance of the people," but without showing the people themselves. Her photographs won the 2014 Inge Morath Award, a prize largely associated with humanist photography. Donovan Wylie's photographs of the Maze prison in Ireland also have echoes, in their repetitive concentration on individual empty cellroom bunks, of Sudek's twisted apple tree.

It seems to me that Sudek's work is humanist in every sense. It is emancipatory in its bid for freedom. It is anthropocentric in its psychological reflection on the human condition. And it is passionately human in its explanatory power, its rejection of geometry, and its redemptive vitality. The work is, as John Banville put it, "suffused with . . . what it is to be alive." ■

Top row, from left: "Name: Muhammed Nusa. Age: 40. Gender: M. Home: Igor. Days walked to border: 40"; "Name: Saddam Omar. Age: 25. Gender: M. Home: Pi. Days walked to border: 8"; "Name: Doula Muhammed. Age: in her thirties. Gender: F. Home: Imai. Days walked to border: 25." Center row, from left: "Name: Hamid Absalah. Age: 6. Gender: M. Home: Mugom. Days walked to border: 20"; "Name: Ajuk Ido. Age: 70+. Gender: M. Home: Jam. Days walked to border: 20"; "Name: Babu Jasir. Age: 6. Gender: M. Home: Gabanit (Gamar Tom). Days walked to border: 20." Bottom row, from left: "Name: Tahiya Ibrahim. Age: in her thirties. Gender: F. Home: Al Ahmer. Days walked to border: 10"; "Name: Makka Kalfar. Age: 7. Gender: F. Home: Buk. Days walked to border: unknown but on the run for 9 months"; "Name: Musa Shep. Age: 2. Gender: M. Home: Gabanit. Days walked to border: 20." All photographs by Shannon Jensen, from her series *A Long Walk*.

Clockwise, from top left: "Prison Cell, H-Block 5, B-Wing 1/25"; "Prison Cell, H-Block 5, B-Wing 17/25"; "Prison Cell, H-Block 5, B-Wing 20/25"; and "Prison Cell, H-Block 5, B-Wing 19/25" © Donovan Wylie/Magnum Photos, from his series *The Maze Prison*