

Gero Fischer

From Vienna Art Diaspora

Key words

Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Vienna, Galerie auf der Pawlatsche, Austria, ethnicity, minorities, migration, immigrant, social history, diaspora, documentary photography, portrait photography, social science, art, sociological view, interview .

Abstract

The portfolio of the eminent and significant emeritus Professor of linguistics at the Institute of Slavic Studies at the University of Vienna Gero Fischer titled From Vienna Art Diaspora presents portraits of 18 artists of different nationalities. He gained artistic inspiration by studying world photography, mainly Czech and Slovak documentary photography. He created several cycles about Vienna, the Austrian-Czech border region, Northern Moravia, Moldavia, the Romanian Banat, Turkey, Poland and Estonia, etc. His main interest in taking photograph projects is everyday life in the tradition of the documentary photograph. In later years he has concentrated on creating portraits. He has exhibited his works in Vienna and abroad. As a curator he realized more than 150 exhibitions where he introduced not only well-known artists but also young graduates of art photography schools from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, Germany and other countries. His photography project From Vienna Art Diaspora between 2008 and 2009 was carried out on the basis of a commission from a non-profit organisation and an institution for migrants. In the context of the photographic display, personally, I see a similarity to the style of the remarkable

American portraitist Arnold Newman and his environmental portraits, which achieved great acclaim during the 1950s. Fischer, like Newman, defines the being of the artists he captures in connection with their most familiar surroundings and representative visual elements showing their professions and personalities. The relation between the photographer and the depicted subject is defined by the important measure of communication with people in front of the camera. As for Newman, likewise with Fischer, it is just an experimental approach and a tendency to graphical simplicity. In the spirit of "environmental portraiture", the point is that a photographer does not try to capture only the subject but also his surroundings and with that portrait itself tell its story. Therefore with both authors it comes down to a kind of psychoanalysis of the portrayed artists, either with their artworks, or in the environment in which they work, live - thus everything which affects their personality development. In this way the limits of the photographic medium are moving to an authentic plain of fellowship with the depicted subjects, with their destiny, being and living. It is a remarkable sociological dimension of photography. Our aim should be an effort to understand each another in integrity as well as in fragments.

My Ways to Photography Between Scientific Work and Artistic Passion

I was born in a small village (as the first out of five children) in Upper Austria five months before the end of World War II and grew up there. My parents were teachers, my father was very engaged in photography as an amateur so I had as a child often the chance to assist him with his work in the dark-room and in this way I got soon quite familiar with the technical aspects of black and white photography. At the beginning I experimented with landscape photography. In the long run it took more than 20 years at the end of my university studies until I discovered for myself photography as a way describing and depicting the world. But I didn't go in a direct way, my academic career was more similar to a zig-zag course. At the beginning of my university studies I was interested in Slavonic languages, I studied in Vienna (2 years) Russian and Czech, in Skopje (1 year) Macedonian and Serbian, and more than six years I spent in Prague where I concentrated on my Czech studies. After taking my doctor's degree in Slavonic languages at the University of Vienna I attended in Prague postgraduate courses in Mathematical Linguistics and oriental languages. 1970 I started my academic career at the University of Vienna in the field of Slavonic Studies and General Linguistics. In the 1970s I was fascinated by Chomsky's Generative Grammar and computer linguistics and I started own experiments in the field of automatic transcription.

But in the long run computational linguistics didn't satisfy my interests entirely and so I turned more to sociolinguistics, minorities, migration and social history. In 1990 I finished a book on the Great Miners' Strike in Britain (1984-5). In Vienna I became more involved in projects with historians, sociologists and ethnologists where I often played the role of a photographic illustrator. These activities made it necessary for me to intensify my engagement in documentary photography. I recognized that both social science and art can bring forward new experiences, new findings, and new views. I started intensively studying photography in libraries from the best examples of world photography (such as D. Lange, E. Weston, T. Modotti, A. Sander, L. Moholy-Nagy, Brassai, L.W. Hine, E. J. Steichen, S. Salgado, A. Adams, H. Cartier-Bresson, R. Frank, A. Sutkus (cf. rare photographs of J. P. Sartre and S. de Beauvoir) and many many others) and found at the end real treasures in Czechoslovak photography. Here I discovered the fascinating pictures of Josef Sudek, his art in composing pictures, his kind of painting with light and shadows using the full universe of the grey step scale. I also became acquainted with early Czechoslovak photography. I studied pictures (published in books, presented in exhibitions in Prague, Brno and Bratislava) by V. J. Bufka, J. Feyfar, F. Drtikol, J. Lauschmann, P. Koblic, E. Wiškovský, F. Kollár, K. Plicka, J. Halaša, S. Protopopov, I. Blühová, K. Aufricht, I. J. Marko, J. Kubín,

R. Kohn, O. Straka, P. Altschul, Z. Tmej, V. Chochola., K. Teige, J. Sever, E. Medková, E. Fafek, J. Marco, K. Kállay, D. Hochová, P. Dias, T. Kuščynskyj, M. Martinček, F. Valent, K. Kuklík, D. Kyndrová, ... New perspectives opened J. Reich (especially his Bohemia 2005 and Dům v krajině / A House in the Country 2007) who I met personally in his „House“, V. Jirásek and the group Český dřevák, all of them fascinated by their large format photography (in a similar way like A. Adams). I must also mention important photographers who strongly inspired and influenced my photographic work as far as photographic seeing and composition is concerned: P. Štecha, M. Luskáčová, V. Kolár, M. Pokorný, J. Hanke, J. Koudelka (his famous Cikáni / Gypsies), the Austrians H. Weber and perfectionist G. Tumler. Closer ties I developed with J. Matschie, A. Sládek, J. Sedlák, St. Abadžić and above all J. Štreit.

Social Documentary Photography

After my formalistic phase at the beginning of my academic career my interest in society grew in importance both in my scientific work as well as in photography. If I had to describe my approach to photography I would like to use the term „sociological view“, I apply it as a general guideline to depict real life with my camera. Together with the historian H. C. Ehalt from Vienna University we were granted a project (sponsored by the City of Vienna) on everyday life in Vienna (Wiener Alltag 1983-4).

The main objective of this project was to document within a year the most important events, street life, cemeteries, railway stations, symbols, the spheres of work and leisure time, cafés, and traffic and so on. We gathered a large quantity of material and presented a selection of about 150 photographs in a media-echoed exhibition in Vienna (1984). Twenty years later I realized more street photography projects on Brno, Prague, Venice, South India (1984) and Cuba (1985), Moldavia (2001), on Viennese stereotypes (2004), Estonia (2004), Sarajevo (2005), Adapazarı (Turkey 2006). In 1994 I risked a photographic side-step to historically tracing documenting Jewish cemeteries in Southern Moravia 1994). In 2014 I documented our University Campus and 2006 I realized together with my friend V. Kočí a critical documentation of the Austrian-Czech border area near Znojmo which we revisited in 2019 (Hybris und Ödnis / Hybris and wasteland 2006 and 2019).

Cooperation with Czech Colleagues

In 1990 new aspects came into my photographic work when I began an intensive phase of cooperation with the Czech photographers Petr Baran and Petr Francán from Brno university. We started with a small project contrasting Vienna and Brno (2000 together with Petr Baran). After that we realized projects in Romania (Czech villages 2001), land live in Northern Moravia (Mezi lesem a plesem / Between Wood and Dance 2003), Ecorebels

(in Slovakia 2004), The Dying city Wałbrzych (Poland, 2005). With our photographic action we were there at the beginning of a kind of patriotic tourism which needs some explaining in words: In the first third of the 19th century (after the fall of the military frontier) Czech farmers settled in the region of southern Banat in Romania, in 2001 about 2600 people were living there under quite difficult economic circumstances, nowadays about 1300, however most of them emigrated to the Czech Republic. Czech villages in Romania are a much frequented photographic subject of almost national interest. These villages are almost an ethnographic museum, you can hear an antiquated language, and you can study and learn to speak the 19th century as if alive: customs, forms of economy, techniques in agriculture, and so on.

Portraits

In 2008 the Association of Czech and Slovak Artists in Austria engaged me to make portraits on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of their emigration to Austria. These portraits had the function of photographic nameplates within a representative exhibition introducing the artists' works. During this photographic work I found that in order to show personality in its reality and spontaneity I had to create an atmosphere far away from any arrangements (light, pose, environment and so on). Creating these special communicative circumstances, I prepared

the intended communicative "photogenic" situations. I made a habit to take portraits at a place individually chosen by the portrayed themselves (very often in cafés). As a consequence of this project I have been involved in a sociological project on immigration (2009 University of Vienna): My role was to record a series of biographical interviews and after a while I combined sociological research with photographic work (portraying the interviewees). Crucial is the special communicative situation of an interview where the interviewed persons speak about what they experienced and how they settled during their life during and after migration - this allows - metaphorically speaking - to read faces like a book. At the end the photographs most authentically visualize their narrative. This was the beginning of a project on immigrants which probably will not be finished soon. The results of this work on portraits are regularly presented in the Galerie auf der Pawlatsche.

Galerie auf der Pawlatsche'

In 1999 I founded within the premises of the Department of Slavonic Studies (University of Vienna) the Galerie auf der Pawlatsche (Pawlatsche, Czech / Slovak pavlač is a kind of corridor connecting rooms from outside of the building). Our Pawlatsche is very bright, north-east-sided, glazed and 75 metres long and technically quite suitable for a gallery. The aim of this gallery is to confront Austrian students with the art of (documentary) photography in Eastern Slavonic countries. With a friend of mine, the painter Vladimír Kočí, we run the gallery, contact photographers, plan exhibitions and organize all necessary work. It is an honour for us to mention that we owe J. Štreit major thanks i.e. encouraging contributions to the development of our gallery from the very beginning. We returned his favour in the way that many of his students have presented their works in our gallery.

All above mentioned projects have been presented in the Gallery auf der Pawlatsche in Vienna. More than 150 exhibitions have taken place since 1999. Some of the most important photo-documentarists from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia, Slovenia, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, Austria, Italy have shown their works in this gallery (J., Štreit, D. Kyndrová, A. Bán, A. Hyža, A. Sládek, J. Sedlák, K. Tůma, M. Sedláček, J. Beran, M.

Pokorný, J. Hanke, D. Šperl, M. Frouz, J. Ernest, St. Tůma, M. Luskáčová, V. Podestát, I. Grossmann, J. Voběrek, B. Maříková, J. Nosek, E. Sobek, J. Pulicar, Český dřevák, Prešporok, A. Waksmundsky, I. Nehera, K. Novotný, J. Ernest, A. Dvořáková - V. Fischer, B. Lamrová, T. Pospěch, L. Lacinová, St. Abadžić, J. Matschie, A. Grishanov, A. Babychuk, E. Belorusets, B. Koniček, B. Ritonja, H. Lambers, A. Schroeder, Ch. Lingg, Sh. Djekshenbaev, M. Maruszak, etc.), ... Our gallery is a work in progress.

PS: My technical equipment I am a passionate traditionalist using BW films and analogue equipment (Leica, Hasselblad, Linhof and 24x36, 6x6 and 4x5" formats), I develop the negatives and enlarge the prints in my darkroom by myself.

Gero Fischer

„FROM VIENNA ART DIASPORA“

It should be important for us to care about others. An extension of Gero Fischer's being is (beyond his enthusiasm?) because his professional activities blend with charitable activities. He is used to accommodating migrants, people in need of at least provisional and basic help, in his home. To be completely honest, who among us would be capable of such a humanistic gesture?

Professor Gero Fischer is an emeritus professor of linguistics at the Institute of Slavic Studies at both the University of Vienna and the University of Masaryk in Brno. His photography project "From Vienna Art Diaspora" between 2008 and 2009 was carried out on the basis of a commission from a non-profit organisation and an institution for migrants. However, the shooting of Viennese diasporas by themselves is not purposeless. The author also teaches theoretically about diasporas and gives lectures on the context of ethnicity in Germany with a focus on Slavs. He has taken photographs of 18 artists of different nationalities. In the displayed photographs we can thus see artists, intellectuals, and public figures from different countries. For example, from the Czech Republic there is the painter and teacher Vladimír Kočí, the writer Milan Ráček, artists Abbé Libanský, Ondřej Kohout, Eva Vonešová, Otakar Slavík and the ceramist Otakar Sliva. The painters Saša Makarová and Lubomír Hnatovič represent Slovakia. As for Serbia, there is the musician Moša Sisič,

from Romania the painter Nina Rabinovich and the writers Elisabeth Mnatsakanjan and Julija Rabinovich (daughter of Nina Rabinovich), from Germany the singer Lissa Foitl, from Israel the guitarist Eric Larry, from Turkey the musician Volkan Yücesu and from Poland the musician Krzysztof Dobrek. These black and white photographs have the effect of cabinet pictures, as if we, viewers, wanted to calm down for a while and slow down on our fast journey to reflect on the destinies and life journeys of the people in the pictures, and maybe re-evaluate our life journeys as well.

The origin of the word 'diaspora' has its roots in the Jewish diaspora and generally means the dispersion of people from their homeland or a community formed by people who have been exiled or removed from their homeland or church. But the significance of diaspora is not negligible, even from the Christian point of view, because by means of the diaspora the possibility to spread a new religion from Palestine began. It means as well a dispersal of certain community members, generally of any nation or religion in foreign environments; or the living members themselves. I was also captivated by a parallel of this word's definition in the scientific branch of botany, where it is defined as the part of a plant, which moves in order to give birth to a new individual. This giving and creating of possibilities and space (wherever we are) in the metaphorical sense of the word is the only way for our development as a society. Progressive societies promote and protect minorities'

and immigrants' rights, identify discrimination as an important factor leading to inequality for migrants, especially those fleeing war zones - their homelands, or who decided to leave due to different reasons. This land and this world were given to us as a gift only for a certain time. It is therefore sad that we take such a self-serving and acquisitive approach to it. We feel the need to defend, attack, and hate that comes from our fears and worries. This current exodus, in my opinion, is nothing other than a repetition of history, as a gesture of ego - a feeling of superiority and power.

In the context of the photographic display, personally, I see a similarity to the style of the remarkable American portraitist Arnold Newman and his environmental portraits, which achieved great acclaim during the fifties of the 20th century. Fischer, like Newman, defines the being of the artists he captures in connection with their most familiar surroundings and representative visual elements showing their professions and personalities. The relation between the photographer and the depicted subject is defined by the important measure of communication with people in front of the camera. As for Newman, likewise Fischer, it is just an experimental approach and tendency to graphical simplicity. In the spirit of "environmental portraiture", the point is that a photographer does not try to capture only the subject but also his surroundings and with that portrait itself tell its story. Therefore, with both authors it comes down

to a kind of psychoanalysis of the portrayed artists, either with their artworks, or in the environment in which they work, live - thus everything which affects their personality development. Newman himself refused to photograph actors, actresses, rock stars, and anyone whom he considered to be "famous only just because they are famous". That's why even today people are benefitting from Fischer's photographs - intellectuals but without unnecessary and pompous clichés and gestures. In the words of Arnold Newman, "a portrait is a certain form of biography". "Its purpose is to inform - now - and to record - for the future." With these words he reminds us that a portrait is a record of a real moment in life captured for eternity, which is as if frozen in an iceberg and is waiting for discovery by anthropologists in the future. If we think about Fischer as a photographer, then we think about his love for analogue photography, mostly on medium format, while he enlarges photographs by himself. In this way the limits of the photography medium are moving to an authentic plain of fellowship with the depicted subjects, with their destiny, being and living. It is a remarkable sociological dimension of photography. Our aim should be the effort to understand each another in integrity as well as in fragments.

Petra Cepková

Gero Fisher

was born in 1944 in Lambach, in Upper Austria, where he attended primary school and graduated from secondary school in 1962.

In autumn of the same year he started studying Slavistics at the University of Vienna. From 1964 - 1970 he studied in Prague, at the same time he studied in the University of Vienna and received his PhD. Since 1970 he has worked at the Institute of Slavic Studies, at first as associate professor, later as professor. Since 2010 he has been retired. He has two daughters and two granddaughters.

He has been interested in photography since his childhood. He gained technical skills from his father who was a passionate amateur photographer. He considers himself self-educated. He gained artistic inspiration by studying world photography, mainly Czech and Slovak documentary photography. He created several cycles about Vienna, the Austrian-Czech border region, Northern Moravia, Moldavia, the Romanian Banat, Turkey, Poland, Estonia, etc. The main interest in taking photograph projects is everyday life in the tradition of the documentary photograph. In later years he concentrated on creating portraits. He exhibited his works in Vienna and abroad. In 1999 he established in the campus of the Institute of Slavic Studies "Galerie auf der Pawlatsche". As the curator he realized more than 150 exhibitions where he introduced not only well-known artists but also young graduates of art photography schools from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, Germany and other countries.

Gero Fischer
(b. 1944, Austria)

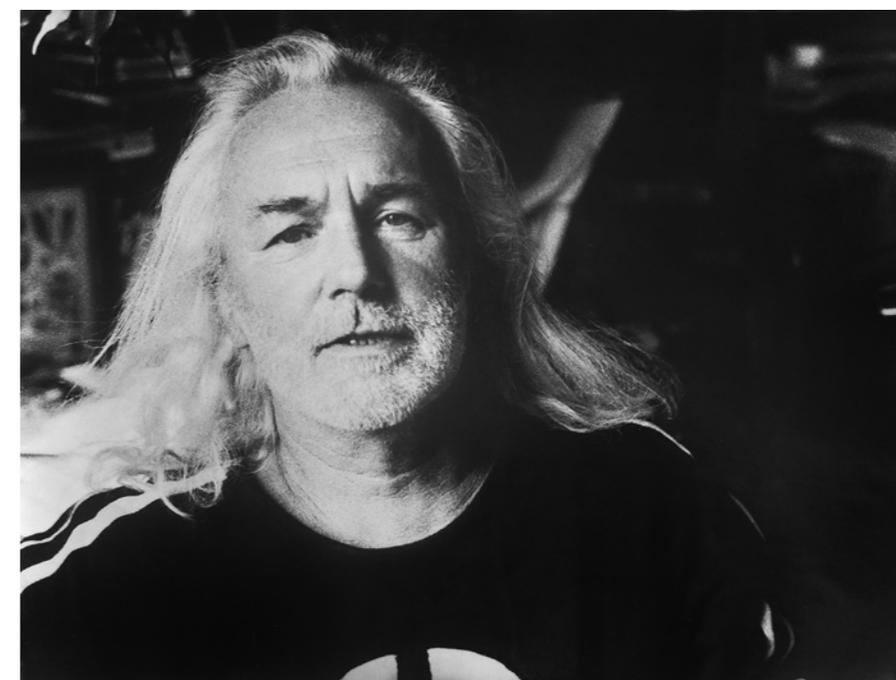
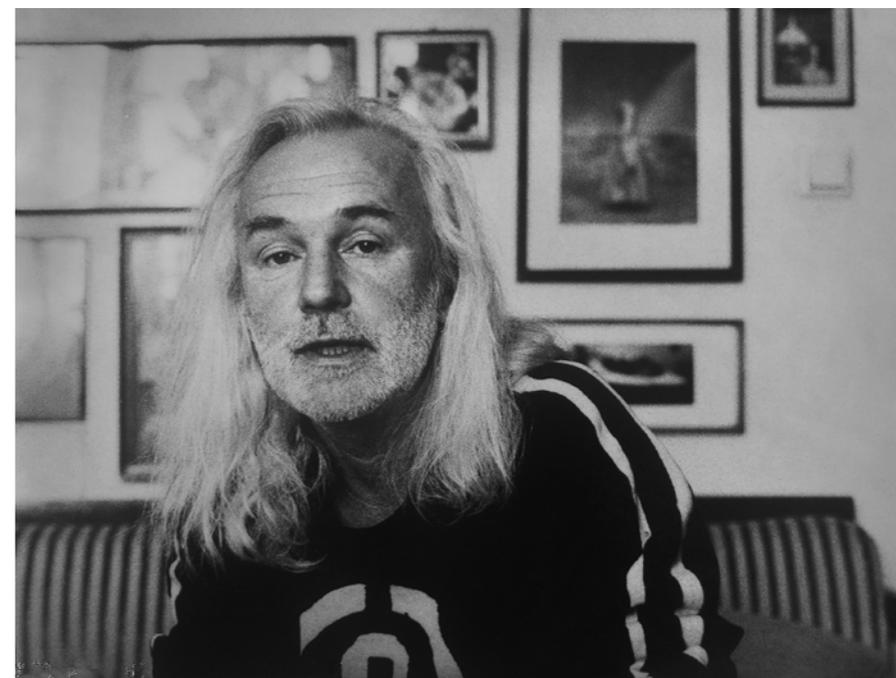
Gero Fischer is Professor of Slavonic Languages at Vienna University, now retired. In 1999 he founded the Galerie auf der Pawlatsche together with the painter and pedagogue Vladimír Kočí, within the premises of the Department of Slavonic Languages University of Vienna.

Education

- 1962-1968 Vienna, Prague, Skopje
PhD. Slavonic Languages University of Vienna
- Since 1970 Assistant Professor at the Institute of Slavonic Languages
- 1973 Habilitation in Mathematical Linguistics
- 1975 Habilitation in Slavonic Languages

Exhibitions

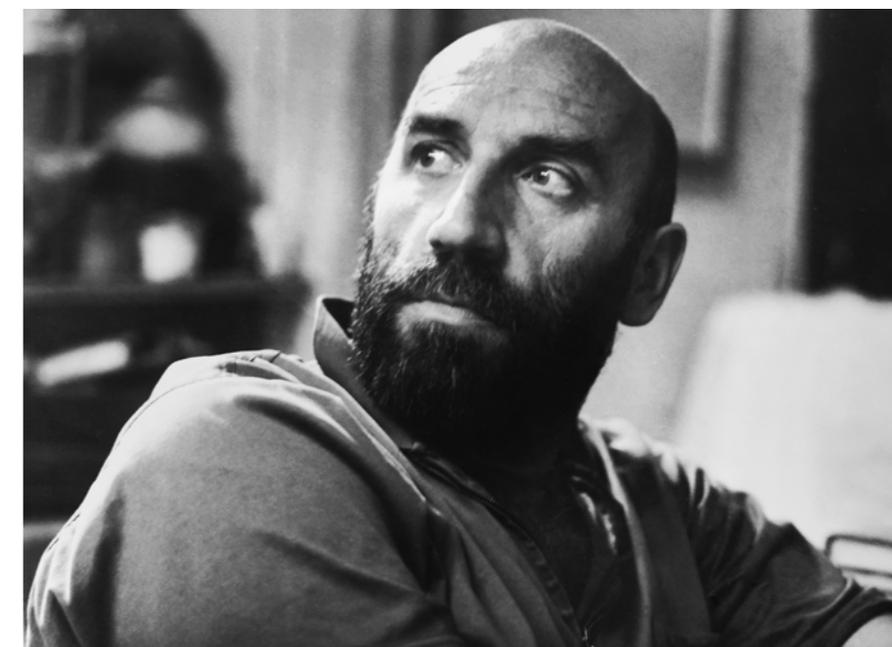
- 2019 *Portraits of Czech and Slovak Artists in Vienna*, Trnava
- 2018 *Brno - The Moravian Manchester in Transition*, Vienna, Our University Campus, Vienna
- 2014 *Landscapes*, Vienna
- 2011 *Portraits of Immigrants II*, Vienna
- 2009 *Portraits of Immigrants I*, Vienna
- 2008 *Bet alemin. Jewish Cemeteries in Bohemia and Moravia*, Vienna
- 2008 *Flashlights from Sarajevo*, Vienna
- 2004 *Far Neighbour Estonia*, Vienna
- 2003 *Moldavia - Forgotten Land Between Prut and Dnjestr*, Vienna
- 2001 *In the Shadow of Europe - Photographic Expeditions in Rumanian Banat*, Vienna
- 1985 *Flashlights from Cuba*, Vienna
- 1984 *Flashlight from South India*, Vienna



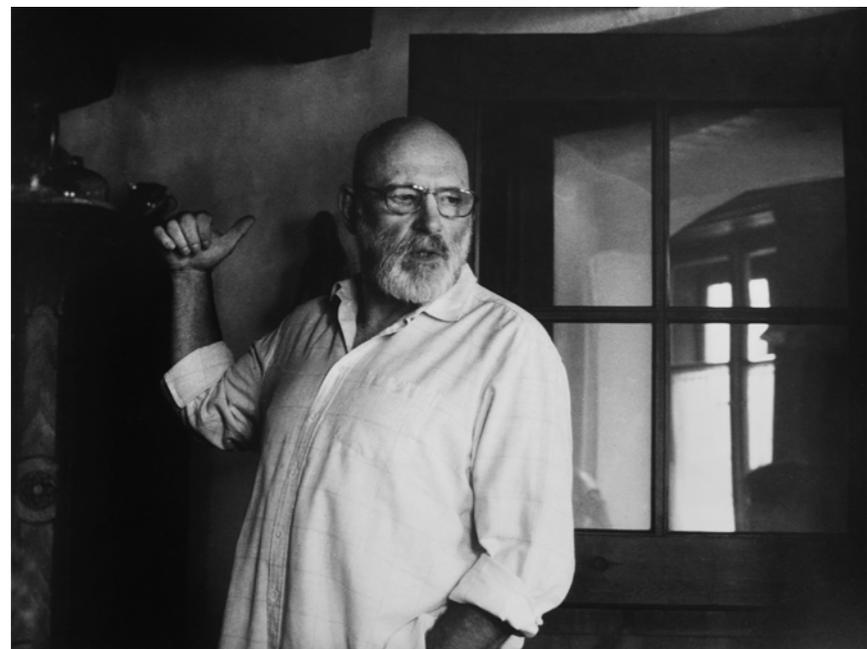
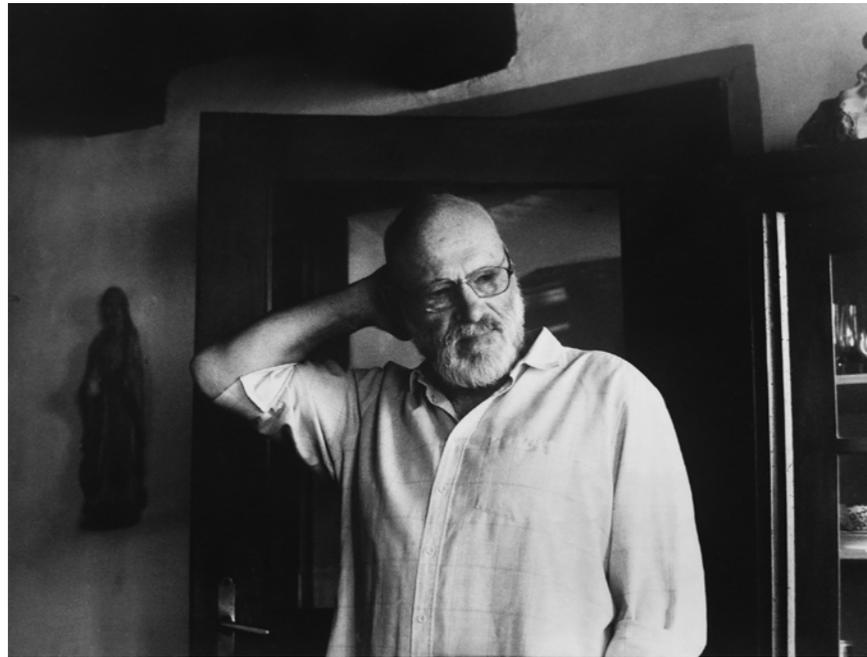
Abbé Libanský, painter, Czech Republic



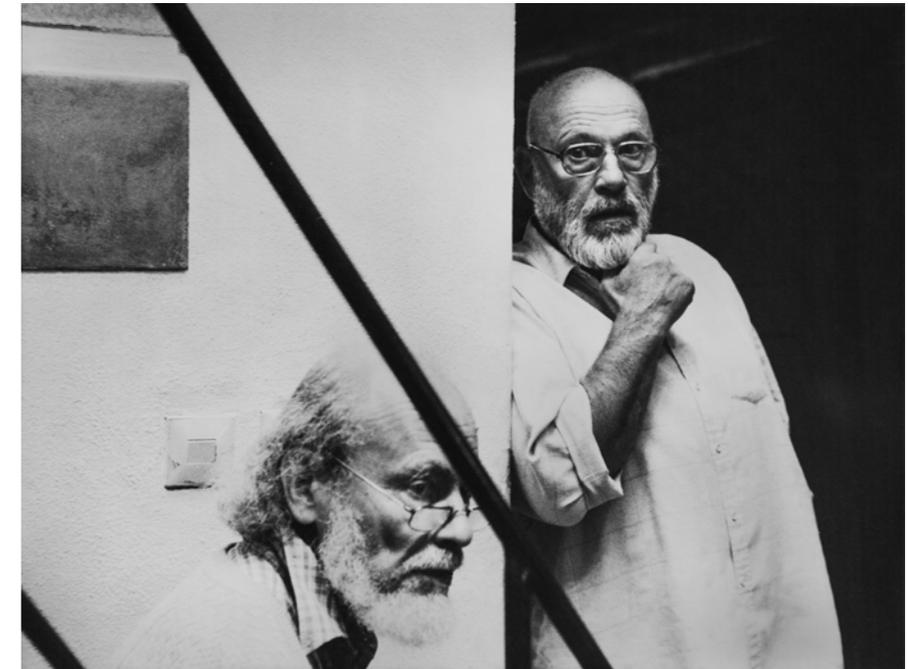
Lissa Foitl, singer, Germany and Eric Larry, guitarist, Israel



Lubomír Hnatovič, painter, Slovak Republic



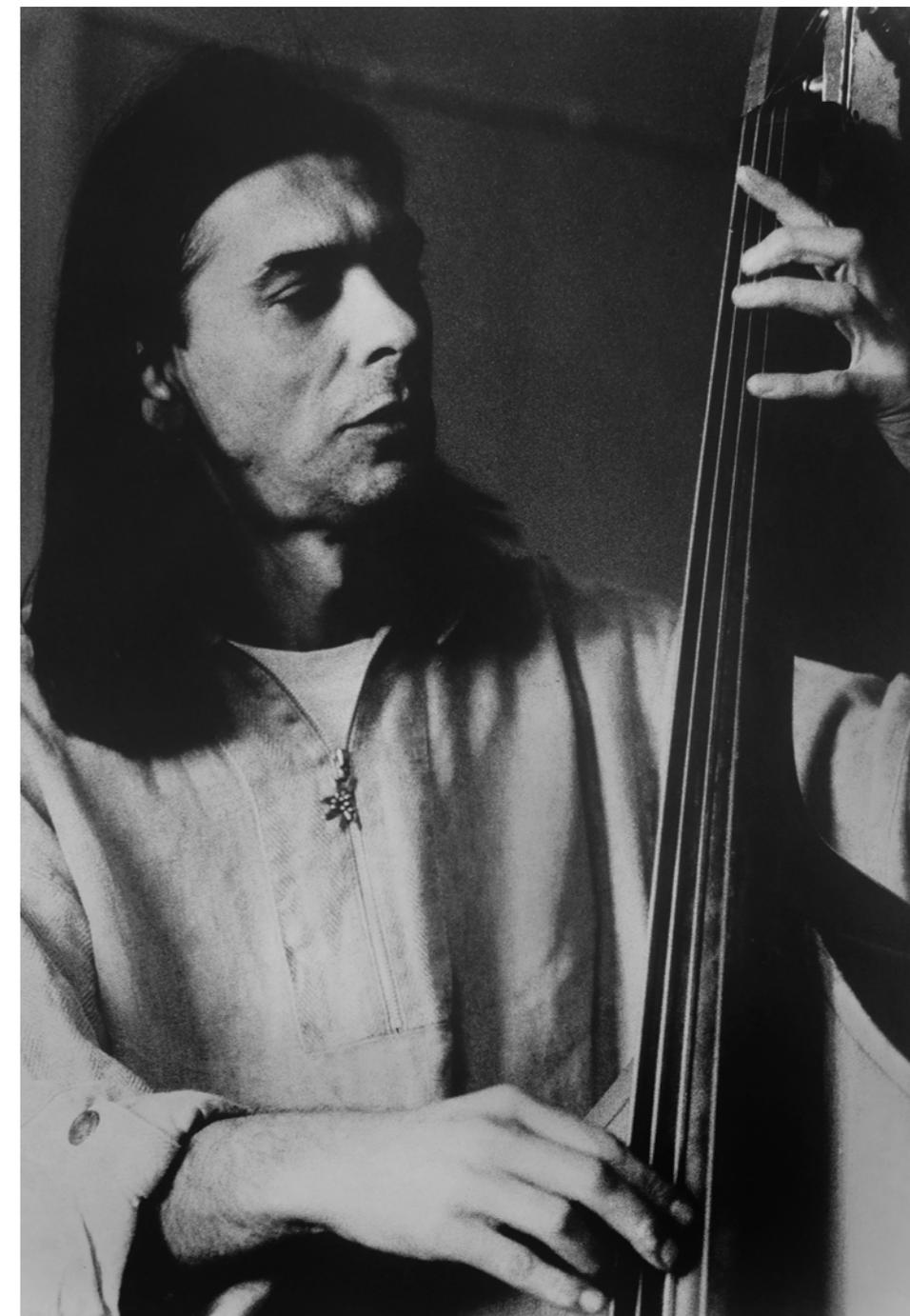
Milan Ráček, writer, Czech Republic



Milan Ráček, writer, Czech Republic, Vladimír Kočí, painter and teacher, Czech Republic



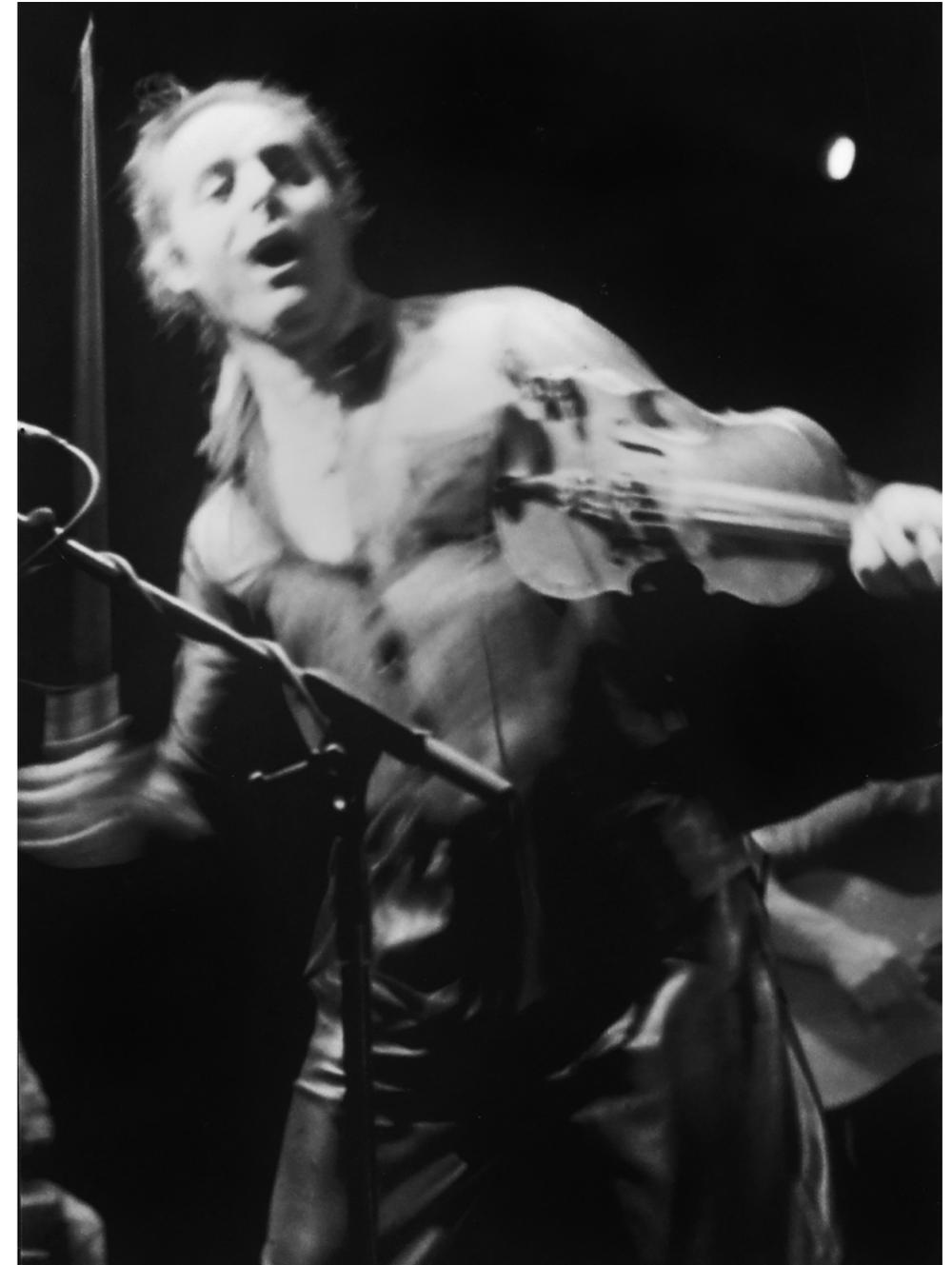
Saša Makarová, painter, Slovak Republic



Volkan Yücesu, musician, Turkey



Volkan Yücesu, musician, Turkey



Moša Sisić, musician, Serbia



Moša Sisić, musician, Serbia



Elisabeth Mnatsakanjan, writer, Romania



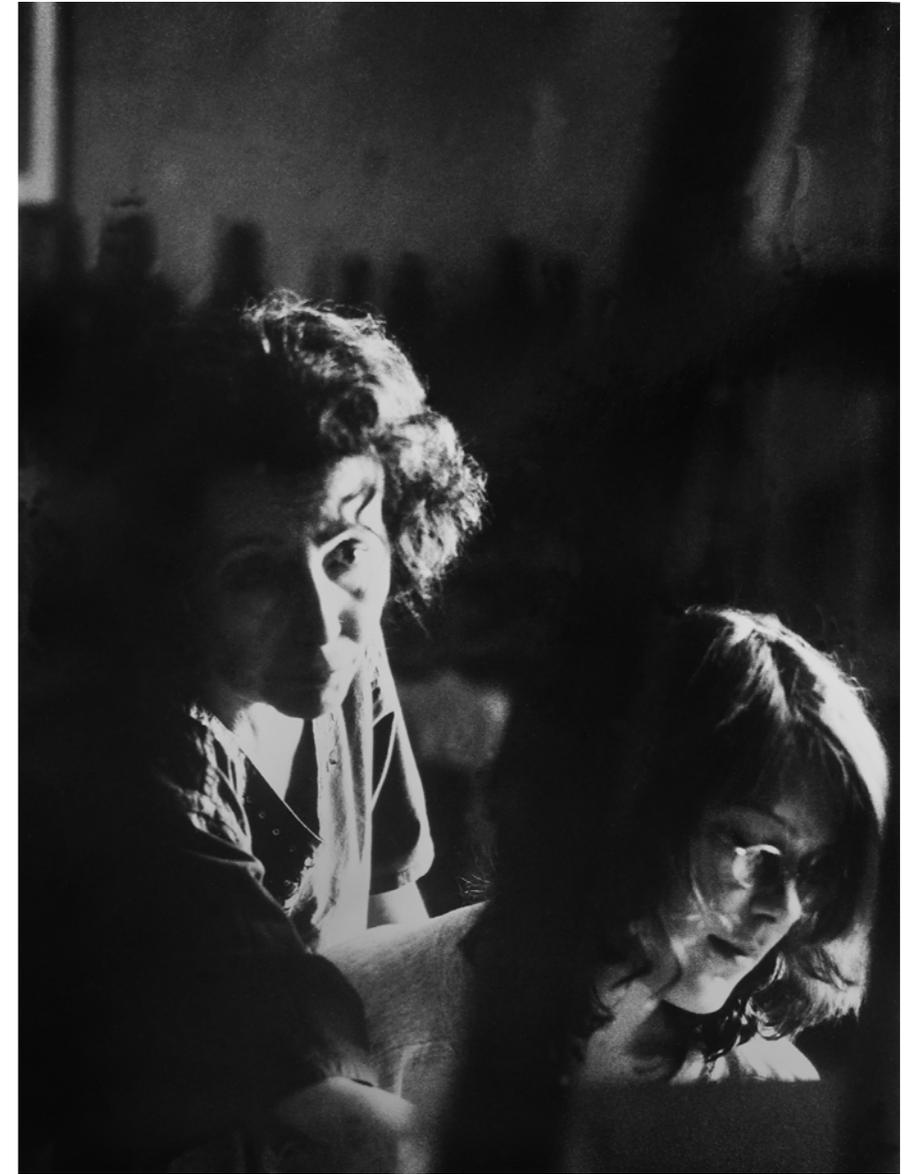
Eva Vonešová, painter, Czech Republic



Eva Vonešová, painter, Czech Republic



Julija Rabinovich, writer, Romania



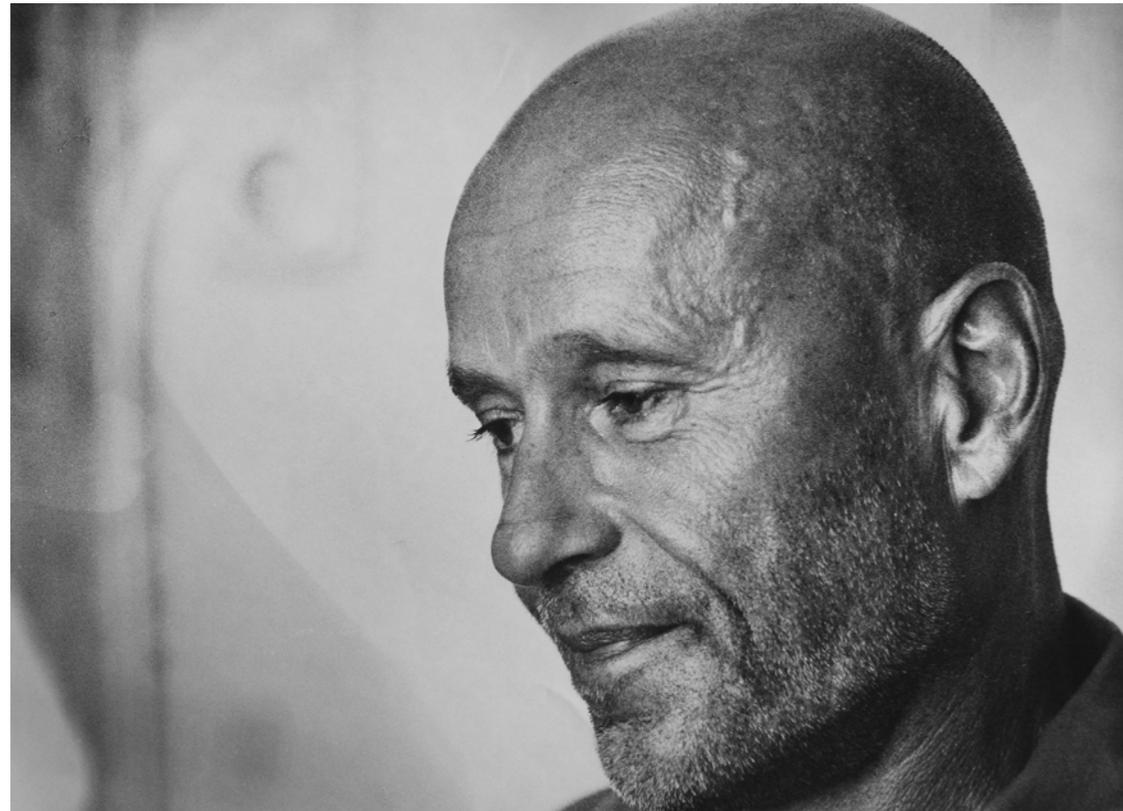
Nina Rabinovich, painter, Romania



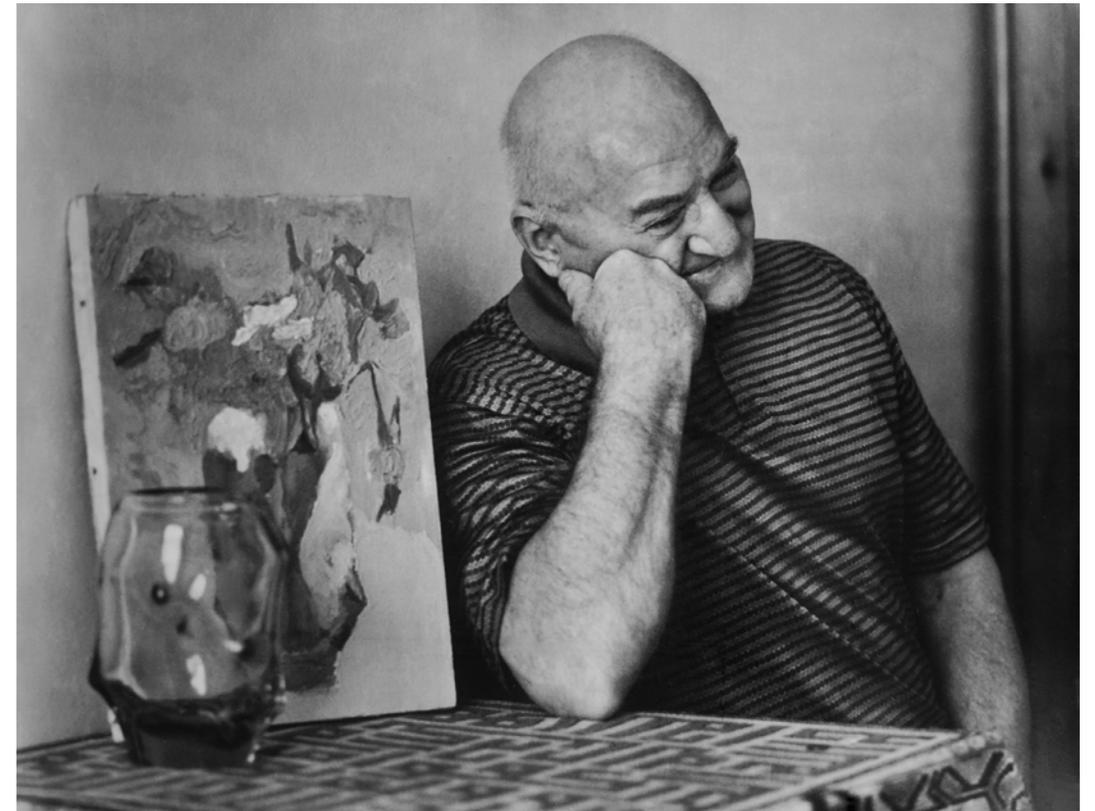
Nina Rabinovich, painter, Romania



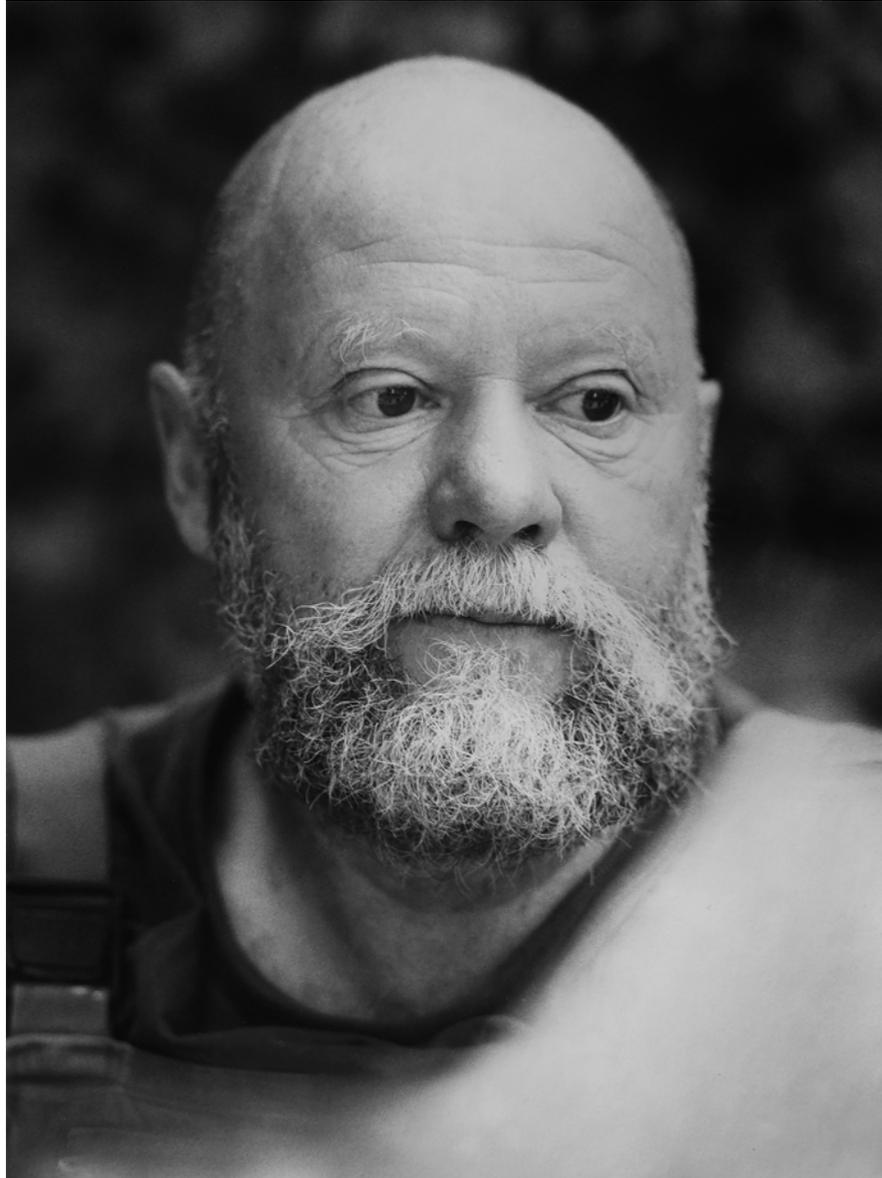
Krzysztof Dobrek, musician, Poland



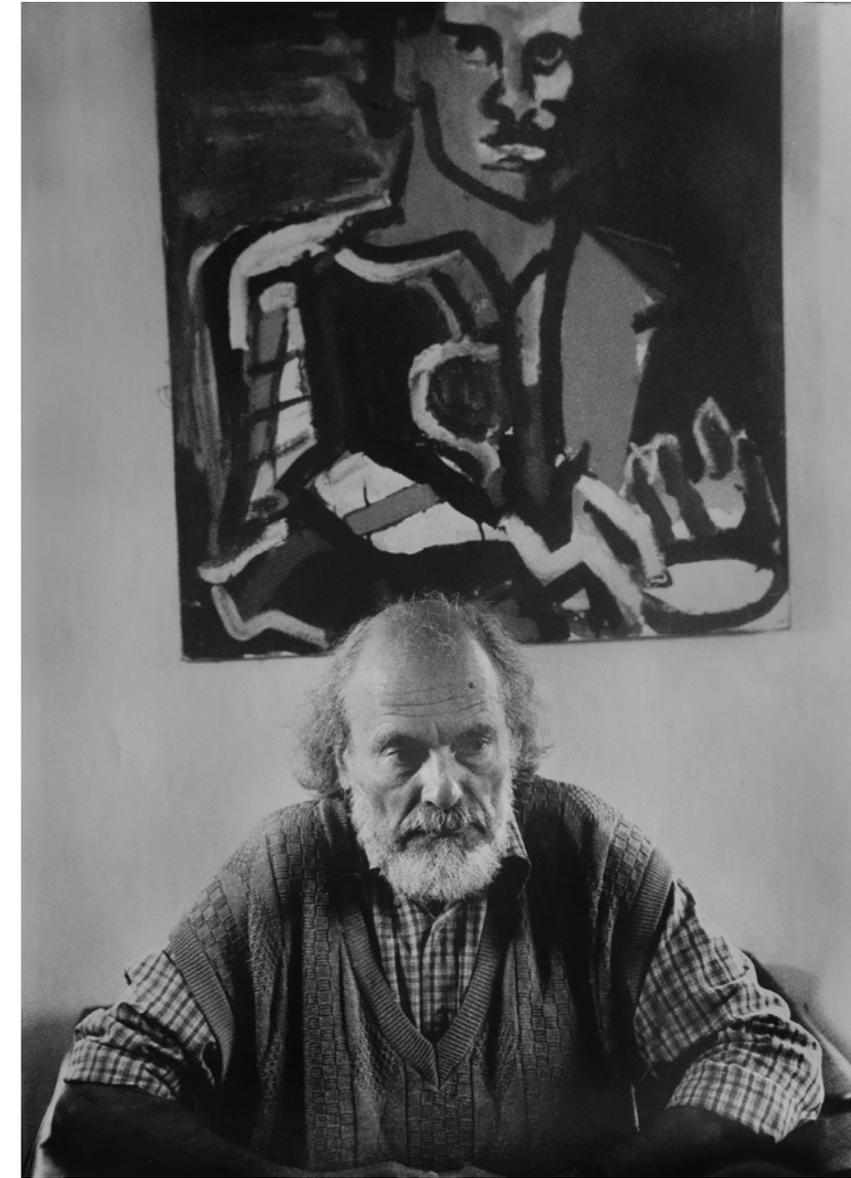
Ondřej Kohout, painter, Czech Republic



Otakar Slavík, painter, Czech Republic



Otakar Sliva, ceramist, Czech Republic



Vladimír Kočí, painter and teacher, Czech Republic