

PHOTO BOOTH

# THE PHOTOGRAPHER WHO LOOKED PAST THE IDEA OF ITALY

*Gianni Berengo Gardin spent a lifetime revealing the real people, real ironies, and real beauty of a country that people only think they know.*

By Max Norman

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Taking a break from a photo shoot, Varese, 1987. Photographs © Gianni Berengo Gardin / Contrasto / Courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery

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The Italian photographer Gianni Berengo Gardin, who died in August at age ninety-four, announced his vocation to the world by pissing on his lens. It was the early nineteen-fifties, and he hadn't yet left his day job in his family's glass shop near Saint Mark's Square, in Venice. He was on an outing with the local photography club La Gondola when drops began to fall, and his companions rushed to cover their valuable equipment. To prove to them that he was no longer an

amateur, and probably to prove something a bit more complicated to himself, Gardin decided to expose his camera to more than just the rain. “With a sophomoric gesture I urinated on an expensive Leica Telyt 200/4 lens mounted on a Visoflex,” he recalled in his autobiography, “In Parole Povere” (“Simply Put”). It’s a shame no one took a picture.



Street photographer, Apulia, 1966.

Gardin, whose black-and-white pictures captured his country’s postwar lurch into modernity, is often called “Italy’s Cartier-Bresson.” Born in 1930, near Genoa, to a Swiss mother and a Venetian father, he spent his childhood in Rome, where he made his first pictures with his mother’s old-fashioned Ica Halloh, before it was confiscated during the Nazi occupation in 1943. (“I went out to take photographs just because I liked to disobey!” he remembered.) He began shooting seriously a decade later in Venice, where he’d moved with his family after the war, and then immersed himself in the French photography scene during a two-year stay in Paris. Supporting himself with a job at a hotel, Gardin served as an informal assistant to Willy Ronis, a photojournalist who elevated emotional truth over Henri Cartier-Bresson’s near-surreal geometric perfection. But like both men he started shooting on a Leica, and remained loyal to the camera for the rest of his life.



Children playing football on the promenade, Apulia, 1966.



Policeman at the protests at the Biennale, Venice, 1968.



Protestors at the Biennale, Venice, 1968.



Reflections of passengers on the Rome-Milan train, 1991.

Yet Gardin owes as much to the conscience of American documentary as to the

verité of French *photoreportage*. Like many Italians, Gardin had an “uncle in America”—this one, however, knew Cornell Capa, the brother of the famous photojournalist Robert Capa, and the founder of the International Center for Photography. At Cornell’s suggestion, Gardin’s uncle sent him books by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, and others, as well as copies of magazines like *Life* and *Popular Photography*. He also sent Ansco 400 high-sensitivity film, a kind of stock that was hard to find in Italy at the time, which Gardin used to take the photographs of Venice that initially made his name—pictures that fused French aesthetics and American sensibilities. There was often subtle social commentary beneath their symmetry: In 1959, when Gardin took a long exposure of lovers smooching in the colonnade near Saint Mark’s Basilica, kissing in public was a potential criminal offense in some parts of Italy. Gardin constantly returned to couples, often together or, as in another renowned photograph, sitting silently apart in a Morris Minor parked facing the British seaside.



A couple parked along the seaside, Great Britain, 1977.



Grandchild and grandmother, Luzzara, Reggio Emilia, 1975.



Family having lunch outdoors, Luzzara, 1973.



The children of Olivetti employees in a company-sponsored kindergarten, Ivrea, Piedmont, 1968.

Though Gardin would later settle in Milan, Venice would be his laboratory for finding new ways to reveal a country that everyone thinks they know, and that artists have been photographing since the invention of the medium. Perhaps his best-known picture—chosen, in 2003, by Cartier-Bresson as one of his ninety-odd all-time favorites—is a kind of statement of the problem. It’s a snapshot made on a crowded *vaporetto* in 1960, in which Gardin attends not only to an untraditional Venetian subject, the impatient wait of the morning commute, but also, in the glassy game of reflections on the boat’s doors, to the casual way in which almost every corner and fold of Venice can multiply into a hall of mirrors, and every window can double as a lens. It’s a portrait of Venice *as* photograph, as Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment.”



Morning commute on a *vaporetto*, Venice, 1960.

In postwar Italy, the decisive moment was most often one of contrasts—between the wrinkled faces of the agrarian past and the well-tailored suits of Italy’s economic boom, between nostalgia for the Old World and the awareness that, frankly, it really wasn’t so nice. Gardin showed us a country where the medieval and the modern, the down-and-out and *la dolce vita*, seemed to coexist. But, unlike some of the Farm Security Administration photographers he learned from, Gardin didn’t idealize the people he encountered. “Poetry doesn’t interest me,” he once told an interviewer. In 1976, he boldly rephotographed Paul Strand’s famous “Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village” (1955) because he found Strand’s portraits in Luzzara, the titular village, to be “too studied, too lyrical for my tastes.” His own take, published in “Un Paese Vent’Anni Dopo,” doesn’t immortalize the villagers—instead, it does the opposite, putting them back into time, and into their time.



A kiss inside the colonnade, St. Mark's Square, Venice, 1959.



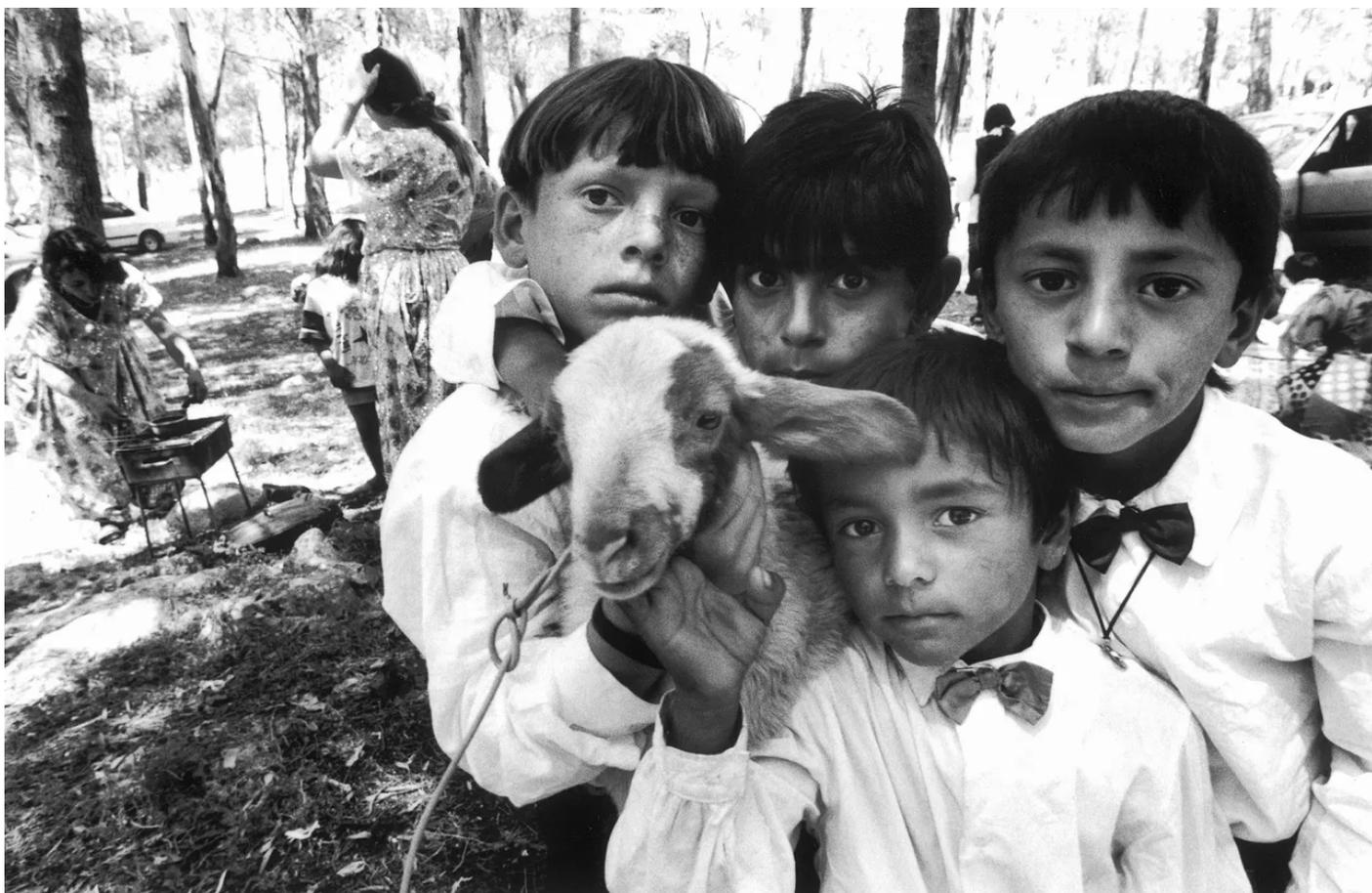
Girls on a swing, Venice, 1958.

Gardin was a humanist in politics as well as style, whose beliefs didn't so much guide his work as emerge from it. Reporting on student protests against the

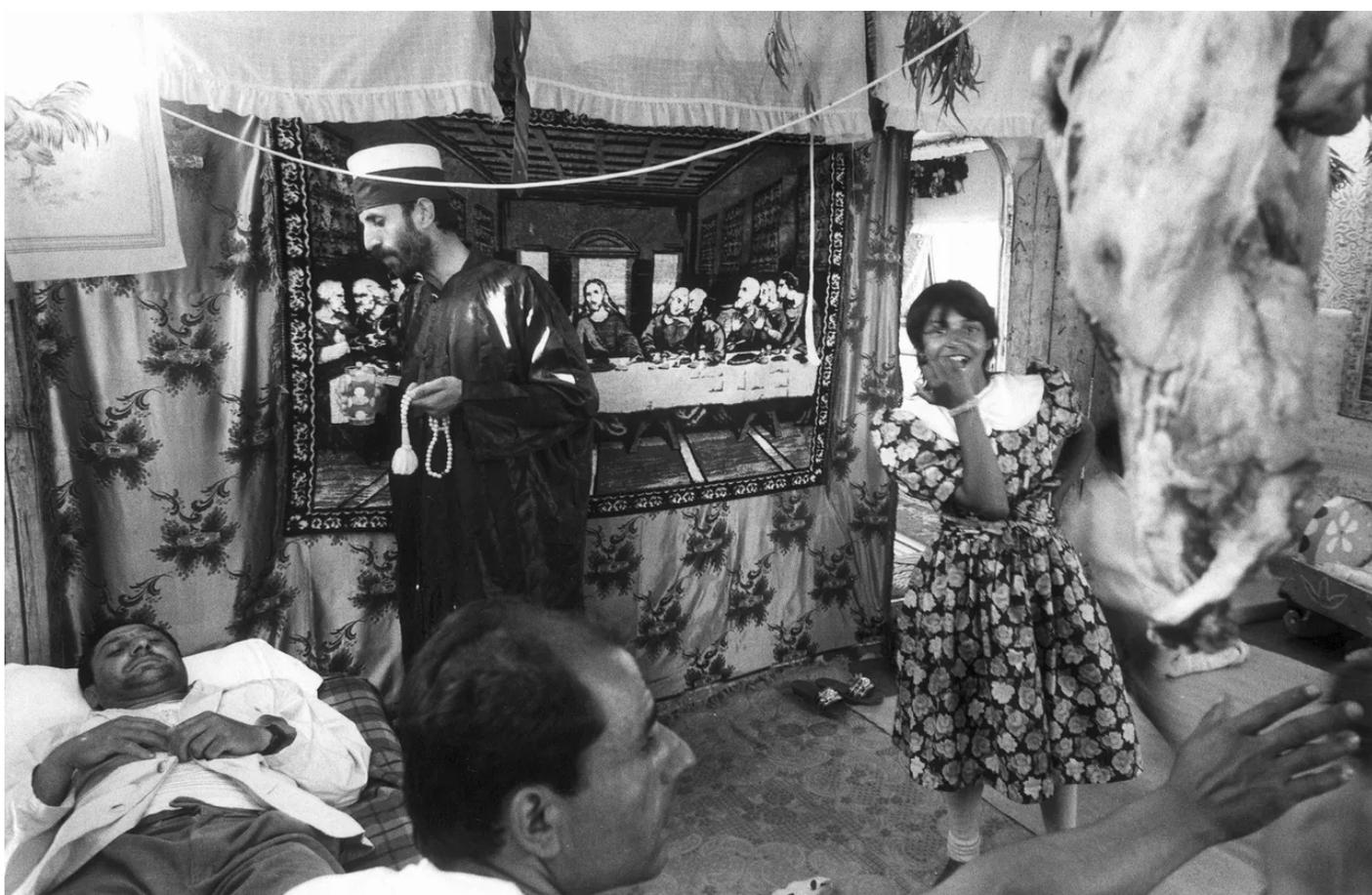
Biennale in 1968, he snapped a blurred portrait of a riot cop charging toward him with the nightstick that would permanently disfigure his right thumb. Of his commissions for then relatively enlightened companies such as Olivetti and Fiat, and then, later, on the construction sites for many of Renzo Piano's buildings, he said, "I was in contact with workers for months, and so as a matter of course I became a Communist, because they were right." Gardin was intuitively interested in class, and undertook census-like studies, along the lines of August Sander's taxonomy of social types, of Italians from all parts of society at work and in their homes. And in the nineteen-nineties, he made intimate, richly textured pictures of Roma families in Florence and Palermo, whose membership in the community of Italians he asserted by making visible the humanity that many chose (and still choose) to ignore.



A Romani camp, Florence, 1993.



In the woods during Herdelesi, a Romani festival, Palermo, 1997.



Herdelesi celebration, Palermo, 1997.

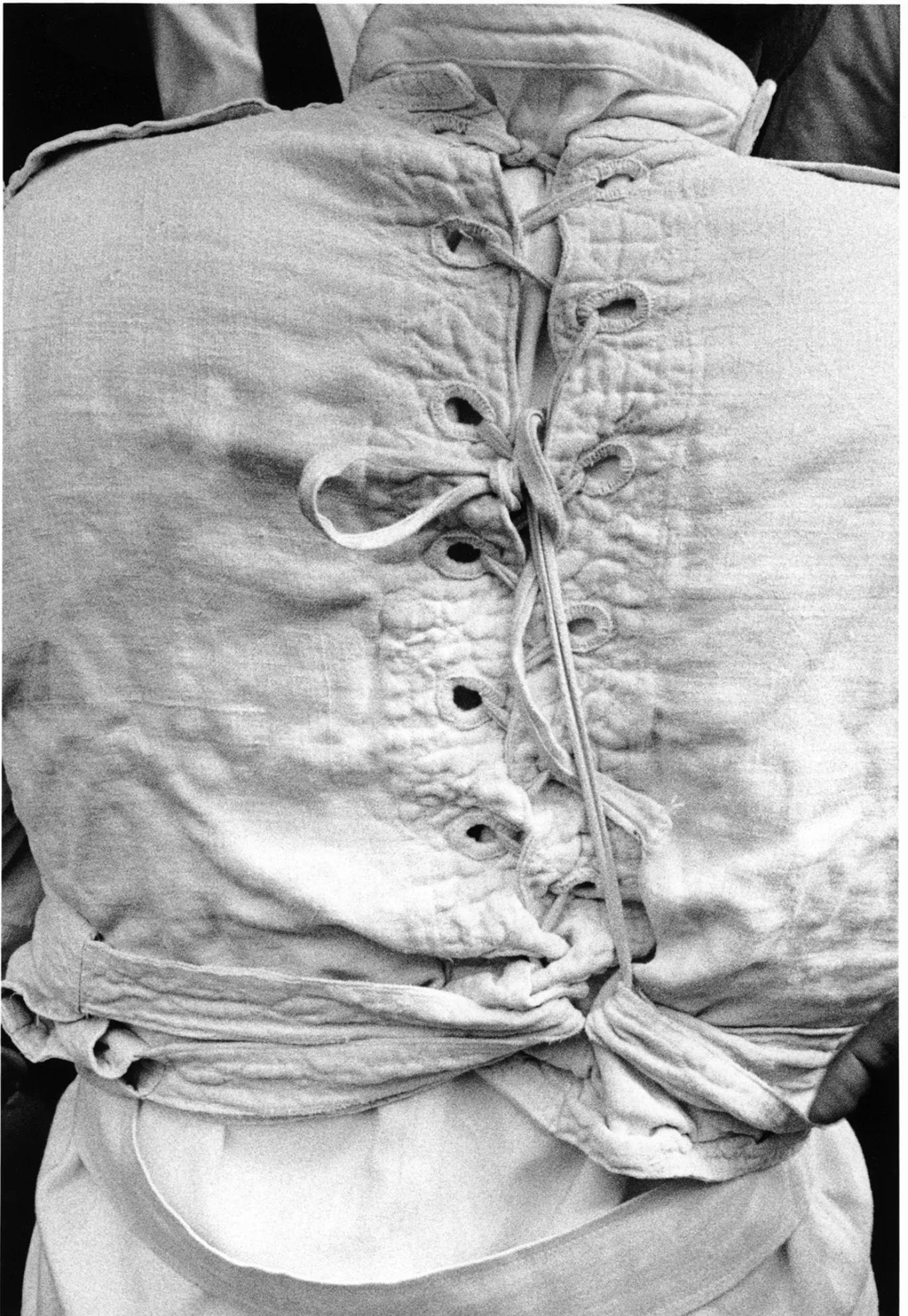


Romani camp, Florence, 1993.

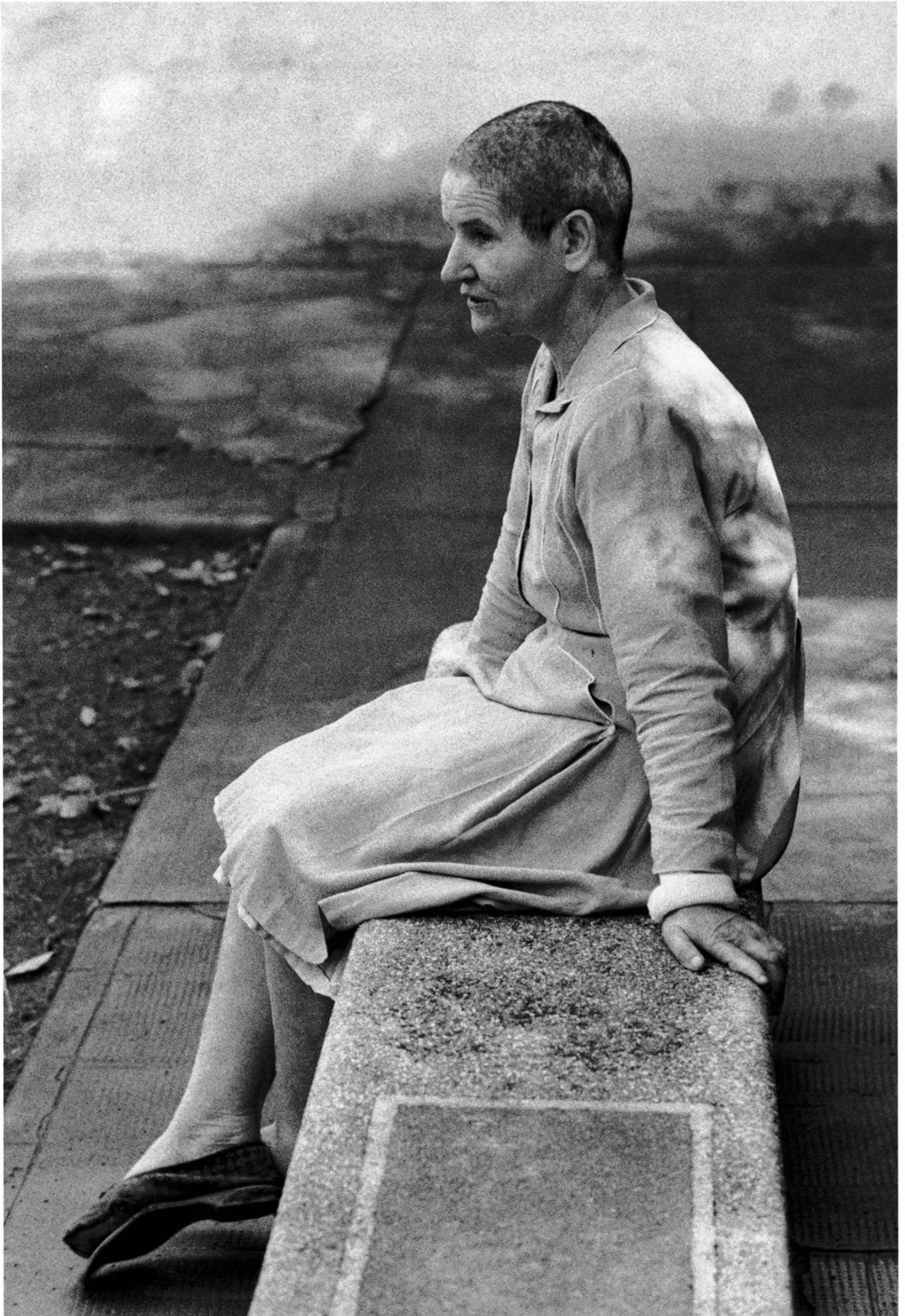
On a few occasions, though, Gardin shot with an agenda. In 1969, he published, in collaboration with the photographer Carla Cerati, “Death by Class,” a book of photographs of Italy’s mental institutions, whose draconian conditions were then the subject of a reform campaign by the pioneering psychiatrist Francesco Basaglia. It showed with bracing frankness the continued use of straitjackets and other illegal forms of restraint, and the shaved heads and forlorn gazes of those who seemed more like inmates than patients. The book, which included a text by Basaglia, is thought to have helped motivate the passage, in 1978, of Law 180, which ended the forced detention of the mentally ill. More recently, from 2013 to 2014, Gardin documented the destructive transit of cruise ships through Venice’s delicate canals—a grotesque symbol for the domination of the city, and the country, by tourism and big business.



The cruise ship MSC Divina passing by the old town, Venice, 2013.



A straitjacket used in mental institutions, Siena, 1968-1969.



A mental-institution patient sitting in the yard, Ferrara, 1968-1969.

“I’m not an artist,” Gardin liked to say. “I’m just a witness of what I see.” The archive he left behind, of more than two million stills, constitutes one large portrait of an era—and, indirectly, of the great age of photojournalism. Unlike his friend Sebastião Salgado, Gardin almost never used digital cameras, and, though he did sometimes crop his shots, he despised manipulation of photographs. Retouching would defeat the point, which is to see a people, a place, an era as they are. Late in life, Gardin started stamping each picture with a simple declaration that said it all: “real photograph.”



St. Mark's Square, Venice, 1960.