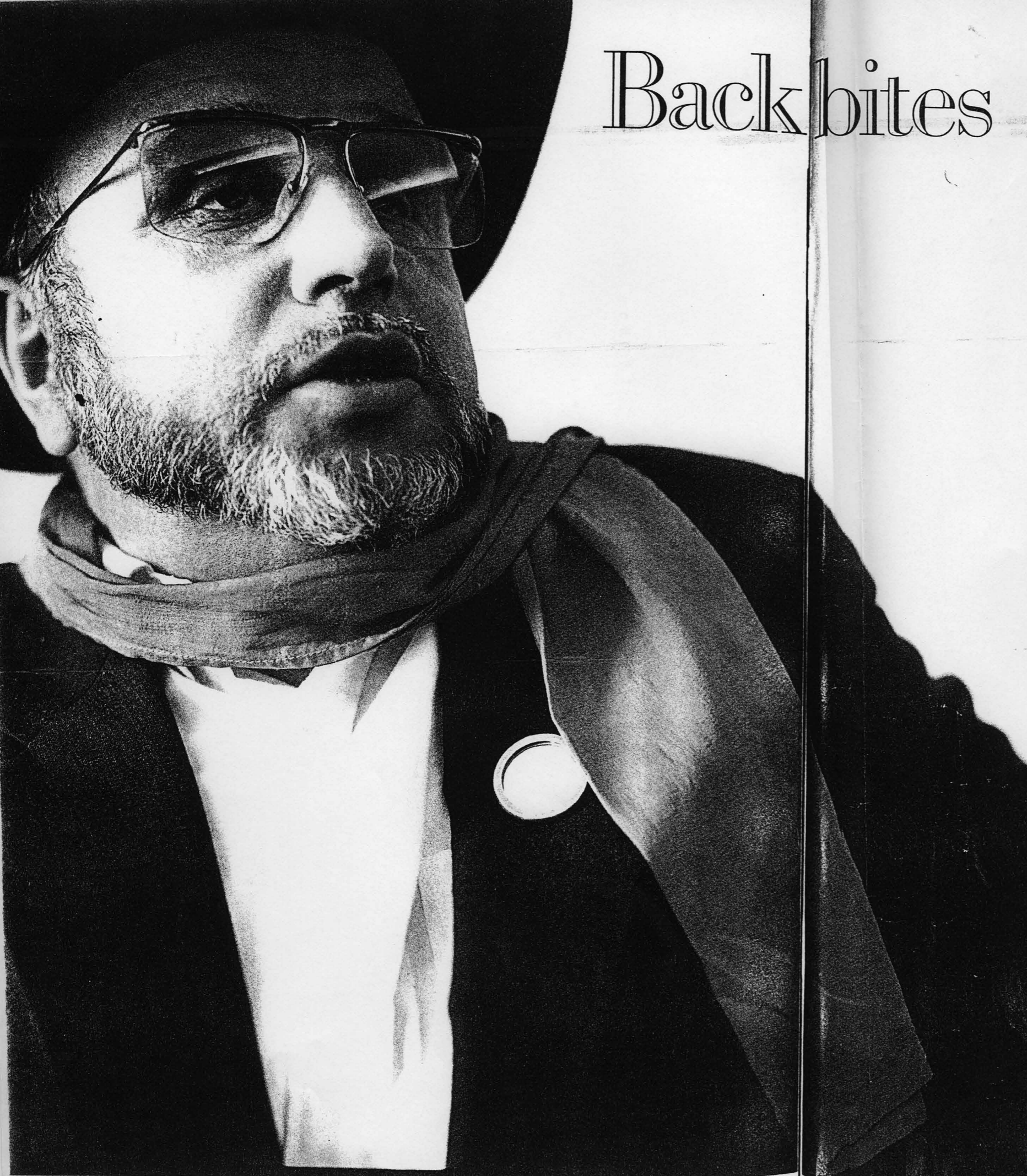


Backbites



SEEING IS BELIEVING

George Barber meets a blind photographer who opens people's eyes

To most people, being blind might be a setback to a career in photography, certainly a complication. Evgen Bavcar has managed to confound all expectations. "If I take photos," he says, "it's not because I am blind, but that I have a desire to see."

Bavcar lives in Paris, but he was born in the mountains of Slovenia in 1946. At the age of ten, a branch flicked into his face and he lost the sight of his right eye. A year later, he was playing in an outhouse and discovered an unexploded German bomb detonator kept by a relative. As if fated, he took a hammer to it and it exploded in his face. Over the course of the next few months, the sight in his left eye slowly receded. His parents, in what must have been a heartbreaking ritual, sought out and gathered together every picture they could lay their hands on – the *Mona Lisa*, Niagara Falls, Mount Everest, Venice and so on – in order to make the most of their son's last days with sight. In that period, he committed as much as he could to memory.

Some years later, Bavcar heard that other boys at school were taking pictures of their girlfriends, and felt jealous. So he started taking photographs himself and found that, even if he couldn't actually see what he had taken, there was a pleasure in knowing that he had captured an image, that he had "stolen" something from the world of vision and had it there in his hands. This gets right to the heart of Bavcar's art and helps explain his development as one of the world's most natural and unartificial conceptual artists. For, ultimately, Bavcar's work can exist for him only as descriptions, as language, as concepts. He does not experience his work, he needs to have it, as it were, "seen" back to him by an assistant.

Bavcar's main photographic technique seems to be the multiple exposure, often layering one subject upon another. He frequently works at night, pointing his camera towards sounds or voices that attract him on the streets of Paris. The finished images are uncanny, representing what Bavcar describes as "a different

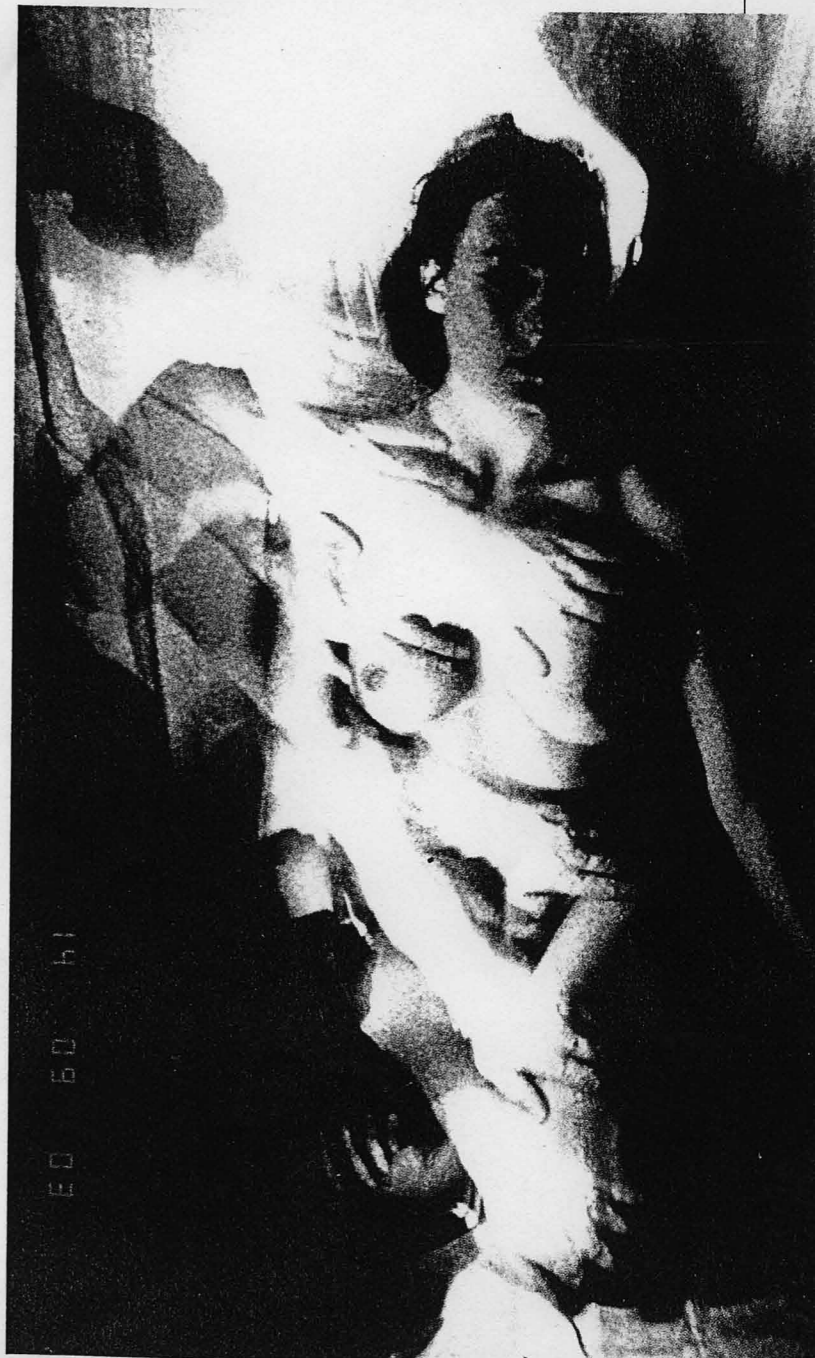
way of seeing". The framing is similar in effect to the jumpy editing of *NYPD Blue*; it has a fascinating "wrongness" – as strange half bodies emerge out of shadows, the viewer doesn't know where to focus. At any rate, the images are unparalleled, the product of a very original route in photography.

Earlier this month, Bavcar addressed a small audience of visually impaired people at the Whitechapel Gallery in east London. He comes across like an austere professor, and it was no surprise to hear him quote philosophers from Nietzsche to Wittgenstein. His talk consisted of a string of aphorisms which were translated into English by Marcus Weisen, arts officer of the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

"I may be physiologically blind," Bavcar said, "but we are all existentially blind..." The audience murmured in bemused and polite agreement. In fact, many of the visually impaired were as surprised as anyone else to discover the existence of a blind photographer – "unusual, isn't he?" It certainly is extremely difficult not to treat Bavcar as an exotic (he hates that), but then he hardly fits into normal categories.

With his references to Derrida (his doctoral thesis was on aesthetics), Bavcar is the quintessential Parisian intellectual – a Jean-Luc Godard film come to life, a man who takes photos all his life but never sees

Evgen Bavcar (left) and (below) his photograph *Tactile Vision*



PORTRAIT BY MIKE ABRAMS