

Vladimír Birgus – Jan Mlčoch Czech Photography of the 20th Century

Prague, Karal Kerlický – Kant 2010, 386 pp., b/w ill., notes, bibl., index

Here on the far Western edge of Europe, I am leafing through this compendious survey of the last century of Czech photography and wondering how much of this history was already familiar over here on the other side of the continent. How many of these photographers did we already know about?

Sudek of course. It's an unfortunate sign of prevailing cultural politics when the photographic output of an entire country comes to be represented by a single artist; one thinks of Alvarez Bravo in Mexico or Goldblatt in South Africa, photographers who, like Sudek, came to represent something of the 'soul' of their respective national cultures. Longevity helps of course and a battle with adversity (personal and/or political), but still it's too much of a burden. Sudek was marvellous, but there has been much more to Czech photography than his solitary, persistent and poetic voice.

What other images might we 'westerners' know? Drtikol's nudes from the early years of pictorialism, perhaps, while the modernist and experimental images of Funke and Rossler come from the period when radical ideas criss-crossed Europe between Paris, Berlin and Moscow with great rapidity, passing through Prague en route and finding unique resolutions there. (The siting of Funke's theatrical double portrait 'After the Carnival' on the cover of this book is in this respect an interesting choice.)

Moving forward, scholars of Surrealism have recently shifted their attention away from a fixation on work made in Paris and the particular qualities of Czech Surrealism have been increasingly admired. Still, when artists such as Jindřich Štyrský and Karel Teige are discussed, it is rarely their important work with photography that is foregrounded. As for major figures aligned with Surrealism in the postwar years such as Emila Medková and Vilém Reichmann, they are still little known outside the Czech Republic.

Of course, visibility becomes a particularly difficult and poignant issue when one comes to the forty year period when Czechoslovakia was dominated by Communism. It's significant therefore that the only Czech photographer who might rival Sudek in reputation, albeit working in a very different field, was one who chose exile after 1968. In this book, Josef Koudelka is represented both by work he made just before leaving – his studies of gypsies and, in a different mode, his record of the tumultuous days of the Russian invasion – and by examples from his later series *Exiles*, which reflect his own position in the 1970s.

Of those who stayed in Czechoslovakia, I remember seeing Jan Saudek's colour work in the 1980s; it now seems even more melodramatic and excessive than it did then. The documentary images made over a long



period by Viktor Kolář in Ostrava have survived much better and their gentle wit and underlying melancholy are, for an English viewer, inevitably reminiscent of the work of Tony Ray-Jones (a link acknowledged by Kolář). Anyone now working within photography will also have noticed the recent, dubious acclamation of Miroslav Tichý, with his primitive technology and even more primitive sexual politics, while among contemporary photographers, the gently evocative images made by Jitka Hanzlová in her childhood home of Rokytník have also received international attention.

Such an exercise is of course extremely partial. I have mentioned thirteen photographers in five paragraphs while this book reproduces work by 267 photographers on over 350 pages. It offers the fullest account of the range of Czech photography in the twentieth century that we have yet had and is valuable for that fact alone; it reveals a rich and complex history which surrounds those few individuals mentioned above.

The book's two authors are well qualified to undertake this daunting task. Jan Mlčoch is the custodian of the major collection of photographs at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, while Vladimír Birgus has been a prolific writer about Czech photography; *Czech Photographic Avant-garde 1918-1948*, published by MIT Press in 2002, was an important study in English of one key period in this history. The exhibitions that Mlčoch and Birgus have previously curated and the books they have authored all feed into this study. ((Moreover, both have photographs included here.)

They are thus eminently suited to undertake the task of describing and making sense of this large and sprawling canvas. There are really two ways that such a large project could be developed. One is to concentrate on a number of key, representative works, artists or periods but omit much else; the other is to offer a broad survey, even-handedly referencing a wide range of work. The authors have explicitly chosen the latter; as they explain in their introduction, 'we deliberately gave preference to the most comprehensive selection possible. Future curators and historians of photography will now surely come with far more selective and original views.'

This approach has its problems of course (as any approach would have). The text is organised into seventeen short, broadly chronological chapters which

bounce the reader back and forth between art and reportage, requiring some swift changes of gear. And to be honest, there are times when one's eyes glaze over and one skittles rather too quickly though lists of names (for the 267 photographers whose work is illustrated are just the tip of the iceberg in this respect). It can sometimes be hard to follow the writers' arguments in such a Sargasso sea of detail. Inevitably, of course, there are many moments when one longs for more detail but the text sweeps on.

In fact, the text takes up surprisingly little of the book in actual physical terms. Each of the chapters is followed by a larger block of the photographs that have been referenced there. (Though there are no figure numbers used to directly link text and image, this proximity ensures that it is usually not too difficult to find a photo mentioned in the text.) These images are the chief glory of the book; beautifully reproduced throughout, they present a splendid and rich mix of the familiar and unfamiliar. Finally, there is also a 23 page chronology which helpfully supplements the text, both photographically and historically.

Writing as I am from outside this subject (geographically, culturally and linguistically), it wouldn't be appropriate to nitpick over any mistakes that might have crept into the text. There are a few misspellings and infelicities in the English, though generally it is both much smoother and more lively than many such translated volumes are. But then it would be surprising if there weren't some glitches in such a large volume.

Perhaps I should concentrate on one aspect of the book which particularly interests me because of my own research: the Czech contribution to Surrealism. How does knowing something of the subject affect a reading of those parts of the book? First, the narrative here feels particularly fragmented, with the 1920s in Chapter 4, the 1930s in Chapter 7, the 1940s in Chapter 10 and the postwar period in Chapter 12. This has the effect of making the continuities between these periods, the important links between say Štyrský and Medková, difficult to discern.

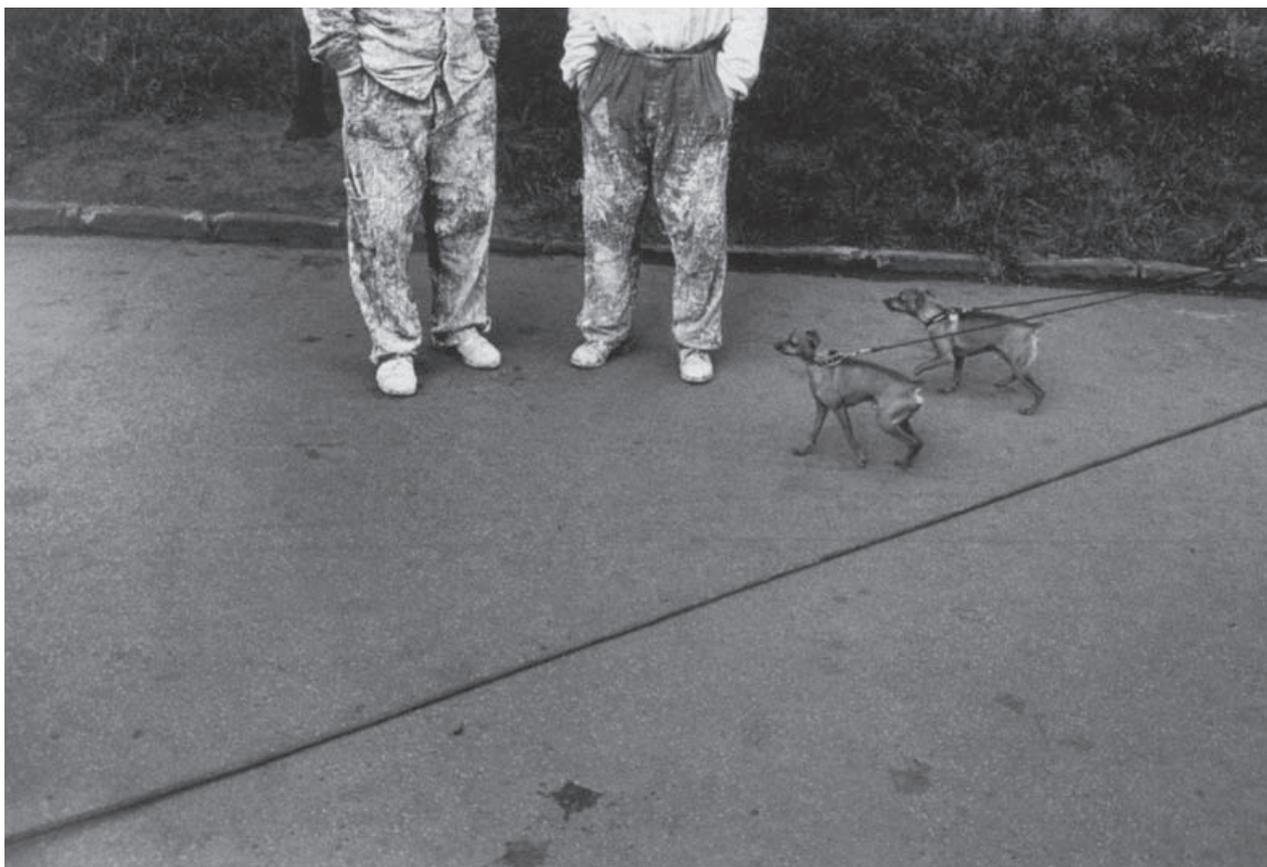
The account of the fundamental tenets of Surrealism is also inevitably abbreviated and hardly indicates why the particular version developed in Czechoslovakia was both different from and much more long-lasting than it was elsewhere in Europe. There is then nothing wrong with this account of Czech Surrealist photography, but it can offer no more than a sketch and may leave the less-informed reader wondering why it mattered.

But of course, this is to criticise the book for not achieving something that it cannot achieve and that, as we have seen, its authors do not try to achieve. They would rightly argue that the reader who wants more on any particular subject can follow their lead to further information and analysis through the notes to the Bibliography. Indeed the book is fully annotated though I'd not advise trying to look at the notes while embroiled in the text itself; it only adds to the sheer overload of information.

1/ Viktor Kolář, Ostrava 1979

*Reproduction: Vladimír Birgus - Jan Mičoch,
Czech Photography of the 20th Century, Praha 2010*





2/ Viktor Kolář, Ostrava 1978

Reproduction: Vladimír Birgus – Jan Mlčoch, Czech
Photography of the 20th Century, Praha 2010

However, for the reader of the English edition, this can add to the frustration, for the vast majority of the references will be inaccessible. Not only because so little has yet been written in English, but also because (for various historical reasons) so few of these publications will be found in libraries outside the Czech Republic. But then, this book is intended as a first – weighty – stepping stone in rectifying this situation.

There is a different kind of challenge in reading (and no doubt in writing) the final chapters on the recent past, for of course it has not yet passed through the filter of history and, as the authors conclude, ‘only time will tell’ where the present open situation will lead. In this respect, it is interesting to turn to another publication, much smaller than this book, which, by geographical chance, I also have here on my bookshelf.

Condition Report accompanied a 2010 exhibition in Cardiff by six contemporary photographic artists associated with FAMU and the show was in part selected by Robert Silverio, head of photography at FAMU. (He has an image in the final chapter of *Czech Photography in the 20th Century*, though none of the exhibiting artists do.) In his catalogue essay, Silverio takes the temperature of contemporary Czech photography, finding that it has only fleeting connections with its own national legacy and far more with work made elsewhere in the

Western world. If English is the *lingua franca* of modern Europe, there is arguably now also a *visualità franca*.

Perhaps then it no longer makes sense to talk of ‘Czech photography’. (Though I have to add that for the outside viewer there is something Czech or middle European or at least non-Anglo-American about much of the contemporary work in both *Condition Report* and *Czech Photography in the 20th Century*.) But then as Birgus and Mlčoch amply demonstrate, Czech photography has never been, not even in the darkest periods of its history, cut off from the larger European context.

This book lays the foundation for a much better understanding of the rich and complex history of Czech photography. It does that job with skill and panache but the story will be incomplete if important parts of this story are not developed and rendered in more detail. One hopes this task will be undertaken by both Czech and foreign writers, for the view from outside a culture will always be different from that inside it. I have been reading one version of the story in English; a reader of the Czech edition will read another. A little further down the line, it will be interesting to put those two versions together and see what comes out of their relationship.

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