



KAREL ČISAŘ – ACADEMY OF ARTS, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN IN PRAGUE

Krzysztof Fijalkowski — Michael Richardson — Ian Walker
**Surrealism and Photography in
 Czechoslovakia**
 On the Needles of Days

Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited 2013, xv + 198 pp., 72 b/w photographs, bibliography, index

When Ian Walker reviewed *Czech Photography of the 20th Century* for *Umění*, he wrote that in Western Europe little was known about the history of Czech photography.¹ There are two possible ways to put this right: either to concentrate on some representative works, artists or periods, or to try to include everything. In their history of Czech photography Vladimír Birgus and Jan Mlčoch decided on the second approach — they divided their essay into seventeen chronological chapters accompanied by a wealth of illustrative material (however, this procedure necessarily led to abbreviation and lack of continuity in their narrative). In the case of the Czech contribution to Surrealist photography on which Walker focuses, in Birgus and Mlčoch's history it is divided between four different chapters, making impossible, for example, any connected interpretation of artists of such different generations as Jindřich Štyrský and Emila Medková. Nor did the authors succeed in explaining why a specific form of Surrealist photography evolved in Czechoslovakia and what reason there was for it to go on developing throughout twentieth century. Then, when the Western reader turns from the book's references to more detailed studies, he/she finds out that few of those on Czech photography are written in English and those that are, are difficult to obtain in libraries abroad. According to Walker, it is up to both Czech and international scholars to correct this situation, for he is aware that views from inside and from outside are different and that it is only by putting them together that one gets a three-dimensional image of the history of Czech photography.

In the light of this argument, we can consider *Surrealism and Photography in Czechoslovakia: On the Needles of Days*, prepared by Ian Walker and two other British scholars, Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, to be the author's contribution to this discussion. We should then ask how he comes to grips with the inadequacies for which he reproached the Czech publication. We should at the same time expect these foreign authors to be capable (especially in the

case of such an internationally oriented movement as Surrealism) of putting Czech Surrealism into the wider context and interpreting it with the help of theoretical methods which have been applied to Surrealist photography in the last thirty years, primarily in France and the United States. This expectancy is strengthened by the authors' announcement in the introduction: that they decided to follow Surrealist photography in Czechoslovakia from the origin of the Surrealist group to the present, and that they focused almost exclusively on authors who are not only classified as Surrealists on the basis of the formal qualities of their work, but who themselves claimed to be so. Of those, Walker and his colleagues gave preference to artists who devoted themselves to the direct, non-manipulated photograph, who recorded the 'surreal' in daily life, and who focused only marginally on collage, staged scenes and manipulated photographs. From the point of view of the quantity of works represented and their significance, the authors consider these documentary-oriented photographs to be the most original contribution of Czech art to the history of Surrealism.

The book is divided into seven chronological chapters of roughly the same length, interspersed by six shorter analyses of specific works and supplemented by four factographic appendices. In the first chapter, Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski describe the genesis of Czech Surrealism from its expansion in the 1930s to the present day. They base their interpretation on the claim that Czech Surrealism was not an offshoot of the Parisian movement of the 1920s but an original trend that derived from the specific social and political conditions of Czechoslovakia between the wars. If, for Parisian Surrealism, the characteristic moment was a crisis and turn to the past, the Czech avant-garde lived more in the present and the future. The Czech avant-garde inclined toward Surrealism as early as the beginning of the 1930s, when the French Surrealists appeared alongside the Czech artists at the Prague exhibition

Poesie 1932, and at the same time a translation of André Breton's Second Manifesto of Surrealism was published in the second number of Vítězslav Nezval's journal *Zvěrokruh* (Zodiac) (1930). The Czech artists did not openly subscribe to Surrealism until 1934, after Jindřich Honzl and Nezval had visited Paris (1933). Even though the first stage of Czech Surrealism lasted only four years, it laid a foundation for activities by the group which developed continually without regard to changes in the political situation during the Occupation and after the onset of Communist totalitarianism. In the 1940s and the 1960s their activities, with some small exceptions, took place in strict privacy and were thus unaffected by external political influences. In fact, according to Richardson and Fijalkowski, this isolation guaranteed members of the group the complete freedom that led to the emergence of a wealth of continually evolving Surrealist works.

This account may well be correct in its essential outlines but, through the unequivocal identification of the development of Surrealism with the origin of the group in 1934, the authors have deprived themselves of the chance to expound in more detail the relationship of the early Czech avant-garde to Surrealist tendencies which, although they anticipated the institutionalised movement, are of crucial importance for the theme of this monograph — for the specific quality of the Czech Surrealist photograph. Karel Teige first used the term Surrealism in his essay 'Foto kino film' (Photo, Cinema, Film 1922), an independent part of which was devoted to Man Ray's films from the series *Champs délicieux*. Teige wrote: 'Photography cannot ever, even here, depart from reality, but it can become super-realist. Surréalisme is the attribute of Man Ray's photographs.'² Atget's shots, which Man Ray published in 1926 in the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*, were, like Man Ray's photography, soon reprinted in Czech avant-garde periodicals. Teige used the first in November 1929 in *ReD* and the second appeared a month later only a few pages after the translation of Breton's manifesto in the second number of Nezval's *Zvěrokruh*. The Czech avant-garde was familiar as early as the end of the 1920s with both the basic tendencies of Surrealist photography: the manipulated 'Man-Ray-style' as well as the documentary 'Atget-style'. The two tendencies were moreover developed in an original way and reflected on theoretically by Jaromír Funke in series of abstract photographs (1927–1929), *Reflexy* (Reflections, 1929) and *Čas trvá* (Time Persists, 1930–1934).

All this has been deliberately disregarded by Richardson and Fijalkowski in their overview and it is only Ian Walker who hastily deals with these facts in the second chapter devoted to Jindřich Štyrský. He too introduces his exposition with a visit by the Czech Surrealists to Paris. However, this time it is a visit in 1935, when the Czech group was already established and during which not only Jindřich Štyrský but

Vítězslav Nezval too exhibited his photographs. In spite of the fact that Nezval later illustrated the poetic travel writing *Ulice Gît-le-Cœur* (Rue Gît-le-Cœur) with these photographs and focused on similar motifs as Štyrský, it is plain that his photographs remained merely tourist snapshots. Štyrský's sets of photographs on the other hand became a key part of the author's work, and already in his lifetime were often exhibited and reproduced. In this chapter, Walker systematically devotes himself to the relationship between Štyrský and Nezval. He quotes their views on photography, according to which it is necessary '[to search] for surreality hidden in everyday objects' (Štyrský) and to emphasise the delicate latent symbolism of objects rid of their actual function: 'photographs deprive [the objects] of their real function and stress their symbolism' (Nezval). He analyses their shared 'attempt to recognise the irrationality of photography' and in conclusion accepts the well-known thesis of Mukařovský about the closeness of the two authors in the crossover between sign and reality. In this context, he verifies the competence of the crossover between literary and art-historical interpretation, which is the high point of his contributions to the book.

The case is the same in two more of Walker's chapters, that on Štyrský and Heisler's book *Na jehlách těchto dní* (On the Needles of Days) (chap. 3), and that on the photographic series by Vilém Reichmann and Jiří Sever (chap. 6). In the photographic publication *On the Needles of Days* Jindřich Heisler replaces Nezval in the role of textual guide to Štyrský's photographs. Word and image naturally complement each other and according to Walker the Czech book is in this respect the forerunner of Éluard and Man Ray's publication *Facile* (1935) and Hugnet's album *La Septième face du dé* (1936). At the same time, the relationship of word and image continually changes, from harmony through brusque antitheses to apparent unrelatedness. Taking into consideration the lack of direct evidence about Heisler's creative method, we can only guess at the specific connection. Despite this, however, Walker convincingly points out many relationships when he draws attention to the deliberate arrangement of the photograph with the female and male figurine, or to the link between the act of looking at the photograph and its indirect description in the text. In the case of Reichmann and Sever the narrative aspects were completely embodied in the syntax of the photographic series. Reichmann put together one of the first sets, *Raněné město* (Wounded City, 1945–1947), from documentary shots of the ruins of his native Brno straight after the war. The documentary nature of photographs in the tradition of Civilist art (New Objectivity) is shifted to Surrealism by the frequent choice of close-ups, as well as titles that uncover hidden layers of meaning in the items photographed. The work of Jiří Sever (a pseudonym for Vojtěch Čech) is then connected with Surrealism through the concept of the closed

photographic series which the artist intensifies by binding the photographs into books in a single edition.

If in these chapters Ian Walker was able to concentrate on the relationship between word and image, Krzysztof Fijalkowski in the sections on post-war Surrealist photography (chap. 4), Emila Medková (chap. 5) and the contemporary Surrealist group (chap. 7, with Michael Richardson) focuses on the documentary nature of Surrealist photography. He draws on the interpretation of Petr Král, according to whom there was a revision in Czech post-war Surrealism of the originally romantic ideas about the possibility of radical change and humanisation of the world. This was replaced by an increased sensitivity towards reality and its uncompromising critique.³ Compared with the lyricizing tendencies of the poetry of everyday of contemporary art photography, the Surrealists focused on revealing the internal contradictions of reality and the impossibility of mutual understanding. From photographs of emptied signs and signals, Emila Medková thus arrived at the subversive language of the disintegrating city. She captured this in an extensive set of photographs of walls whose frontality influenced the films of Jan Švankmajer. According to Fijalkowski and Richardson, not even the political revolution of 1989 changed much in the critical attitude of the Surrealists. In their view, the bureaucratic state apparatus was replaced only by a market economy that rivalled the previous regime in the suppression of people's freedom. That is why the Surrealists put so much emphasis on collective activities such as games, cooperation and critical interpretation that are the basis of the possibility of an alternative community, continually defining itself with regard to the prevailing state of society.

The main thesis of the monograph is the idea of the originality and continuity of Czech Surrealist photography that relies on the search for sur-reality in documentary records of our immediate surroundings. However convincing this thesis can sound, it is based on an admitted selectivity of theme. In their approach, the authors follow on from the similar position of Petr Král and the historian of photography Antonín Dufek. They are the most frequently quoted authorities in the monograph, while the art historians Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Šrp are mentioned only selectively. Still more arresting is the absence, apart from a single mention in the introduction, of references to the work of such international scholars as Matthew S. Wittkovsky and especially Rosalind Krauss, who in the 1980s completely

changed the approach of art history towards the Surrealist photograph. In spite of her critical work, these international authors paradoxically cling to Antonín Dufek's claim that the reason for the lack of Czech Surrealist photography at the ground breaking exhibition *L'Amour fou* (1985), prepared by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, was Krauss's one-sided orientation towards manipulated and staged photographs. Whereas it was she who showed that non-manipulated photographs from Surrealist publications stand closest to the heart of a movement which envisages reality itself as coded and deployed in configuration.⁴ Deeper consideration of her interpretation would lead Walker and his colleagues to a re-evaluation of the supposed conflict between 'documentary' and 'manipulated' Surrealist photography. They could thus enrich their work with analyses of photographic 'actions' by Václav Zykmond and 'structages' by Miroslav Hák. However, even without this their contribution to an outsider's view of Czech Surrealist photography is sufficient challenge to Czech scholars to defend their own view before the international public.

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA DAY

NOTES

- 1 Ian Walker, Vladimír Birgus — Jan Mlčoch, *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*, *Umění* LIX, 2011, pp. 326–328.
- 2 Karel Teige, *Foto kino film* (1922), in: idem, *Svět stavby a básně. Studie z dvacátých let*, ed. Jiří Brabec et al., Praha 1966, p. 74.
- 3 Petr Král, *Fotografie v surrealismu*, Praha 1994, pp. 50–51.
- 4 This conflict reveals the fact that in the passage that has according to Dufek and according to the authors of the monograph to testify to a preference for manipulating and staging the photograph, Krauss in fact interprets Man Ray's 'documentary' shot *Anatomies* (1930). Compare with this Antonín Dufek, *Imaginative Photography*, in: Jaroslav Anděl (ed.), *Czech Modernism. 1900–1945* (exh. cat.), Houston TX, Boston MA 1990, p. 146. — Rosalind Krauss — Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (exh. cat.), Washington D.C., New York, Abbeville Press 1985, p. 147.

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