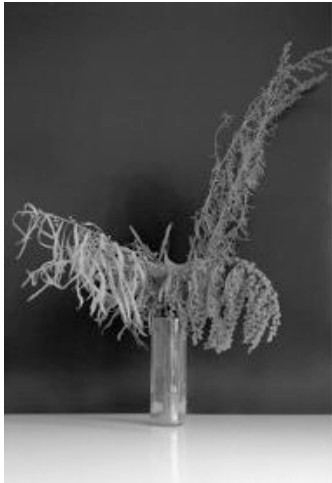


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MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO
600 South Michigan Avenue Chicago IL 60605
312-663-5554 Fax 312-344-8067
mocp@colum.edu www.mocp.org

***50% GREY: CONTEMPORARY CZECH PHOTOGRAPHY
RECONSIDERED***
January 29 - March 28, 2010

Work by:
Štěpán Grygar
Jasanský/Polák
Markéta Othová
Michal Pěchouček
Jiří Thýn

Also on view:
**The Anne and Jacques Baruch Collection of Czech Photography:
Recent Acquisitions**

OPENING RECEPTION
Thursday, January 28, 5 – 7 pm

Chicago — The Museum of Contemporary Photography is pleased to announce the exhibition ***50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered***, presenting contemporary Czech photographers who investigate themes such as the relationship between time and space in the process of perception, and the potential of photography to tell a story and constitute a language of fiction. In conjunction with *50% Grey*, the MoCP will highlight works from the Baruch Collection of Czech photography, which were gifted to the museum in 2009, in an exhibition titled **The Anne and Jacques Baruch Collection of Czech Photography: Recent Acquisitions**.

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered brings together the work of six contemporary Czech photographers (two of whom work collaboratively), all of whom reflect on the varied materials of photography and find poetic resonance in a lack of obviously-poetic subject matter. Instead, they investigate the potential for photographic veracity, by pushing the idea of

framing and selection to counter any perceived objectivity the medium might have. Instead of creating brightly colored, large, splashy digital works that dominate much of contemporary photography, they make quieter works, generally gelatin silver prints using traditional chemistry and film, a trademark that extends the rich black and white photographic tradition of their country. However, this exhibition does not argue that these artists are primarily influenced by their nationality; rather, it is intended only partly to consider how the pallor of historical circumstance, in this case a stereotypically “grey” post-communist society, might impact artistic production, as well as how a nationalist label affects an artist and an exhibition in a more general sense.

Jasanský/Polák (Lukas Jasanský, b. 1965; Martin Polák, b. 1966) have been working as an artist team since they studied together in the 1990s. They were both interested in departing from the tradition of extreme subjectivity that dominated Czech fine art photography at the time, and instead began to pursue a practice based more on discourse. After years of working together on many conceptual, technically straightforward, projects, they were commissioned in 2007 to make art at the European Parliament in Brussels. They noticed that the gifts on display from various nations, artworks that were meant as representative examples of cultural production from the countries, often had the feeling of political tools in their conservatism, symbolism, or grandeur. Jasanský/Polák level the playing field between the works by shooting them all in an unembellished, deadpan style and in black and white. Their perceived objectivism is perhaps a fitting metaphor for the desired diplomacy of the European parliament. Jasanský/Polák also investigate the potential of photography to straddle the representational and the abstract in their series *Abstraction* (1994-95). By attempting to make images that recall abstract compositions using everyday objects and settings, Jasanský/Polák underscore the cultural knowledge of what an abstract image looks like. Color, often a significant and rather pleasing attribute of abstract art, is siphoned out of the scene, turning the pictures into a more controlled, almost scientific, endeavor. In their critique there is irony, as they hint at the absurdity of making abstract art with photography.

Compared to Jasanský/Polák, the work of **Štěpán Grygar** (b. 1956) sits in a middle ground, in pictures where the abstraction and representational elements are deliberately leveled, with each alternately holding more weight. In *Street (Prague)*, 2002, a series of black and white images shot out of a window of the street below during a snowstorm, the images are easily readable, in a manner similar to Jasanský/Polák’s “abstractions.” But displayed as a series of seven images, the graphic, patterned quality of the snow dominates as the background fades more or less away. In his other works, Grygar builds abstract images for the camera, employing materials such as flour, paper, and light as well as unusual camera angles to create graphic images that defy the flatness of photography and create optically intricate compositions, much in the tradition of the avant-garde photographers of the 1920s and '30s. He is not interested in abstraction for the sake of ornamentation or decoration, but rather as a means for illuminating the perceptual process.

Jiří Thýn (b. 1977) also works directly with abstraction, raising questions about the limitations of photography along the way. In his works that inspired the title of this exhibition, *50% Grey* (2008), he disrupts the illusion of photography by bringing its science and materials to the fore. In one part of the series, he constructs “negatives” out of layered glass sheets silkscreened with blocks of bright color. He then exposes black and white photographic paper using the color block negatives, a process that creates different shades of grey depending on exposure time. The work is always displayed as two parts, the stratified “negative” and its corresponding photogram, a presentation strategy that reveals the reduction of information that is photography as well as the instability of the notion of the artwork. His title, *50% Grey*, is reminiscent of the idea of the perfect negative and print sought after by practitioners such as Ansel Adams, who taught that one ideally exposes for “middle Grey,” but that each situation requires a fair amount of tweaking based on the specifics of the scene, and that there has to be room for intuition and experimentation.

Markéta Othová's (b. 1968) *Leçon de Photographie* (2007), is composed of seven pictures that depict a white box against a white background. The color of the captured object is no different from its surroundings, so that one would expect it to remain invisible – and yet it turns out to be set off by the shading that outlines the silhouette. Thus, we end up seeing the object in the photograph only due to the difference injected into it by photography. This is also made explicit in the untitled diptych of a floral still life from 2008. Here, Othová has captured one and the same bunch of flowers, first against a dark and then against a light background, with the object thus being captured as light-colored in the first photograph and dark-colored in the second. Combined in a single installation, we tend to consider these two independent images merely as a positive and a negative. The stability of the visual world is most forcefully disrupted in another untitled diptych, this time from 2000. Through painting, Othová links two perfectly distinct photographs in such a way that we consider them identical. Othová has achieved this effect by means of a geometrically reductive painting that leaves only a small cut-out in the middle of the first image—a segment that appears to fit into the blind spot in the second picture's painted area.

And finally, **Michal Pěchouček's** (b. 1973) *Filmogram #1* (2007) is a set of twenty-four dyptichs of two views of an interior space, shot once every hour for an entire day, for a total of forty-eight exposures. The title of the piece, *Filmogram*, is a play on the word “photogram,” or an image made by placing objects directly on photographic paper and exposing it to light, thus circumventing the use of a camera and film. By making twenty four exposures a day, and exhibiting them in a row, he makes reference to the fact that film is generally comprised of twenty-four frames per second. Pěchouček is not only a photographer, but has spent most of his artistic career making multi-media works that combine elements of film, painting and performance. Pěchouček's video *Pater Noster* (2005), references the first two words of the Lord's Prayer, and are also used to describe the old-fashioned elevators in Europe that do not stop but continually rotate in a circle, like the motion of a rosary in someone's hands. As the action plays out in the seemingly frozen time and space of still images, it is complicated by the footage's up and down scrolling, creating a matrix of duration and direction for the viewer to navigate.

RELATED EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION January 28, 2010, 5 – 7pm

Join us for a reception celebrating the opening of the *50% Grey* and *Baruch Collection* exhibitions.

ARTIST TALK

January 28, 2010 4 pm

Curator Karel Cisář and exhibiting artist Markéta Othová discuss the work on view.

PANEL DISCUSSION: Making and collecting art in Czechoslovakia, before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain

DATE TBA, check mocp.org for details

Panelists include: Barbara Kalwajtys, director of the Baruch Gallery, who will tell the story of the Baruch collection; exhibiting artist Štěpán Grygar, who will speak about the impact of this era on his family (his parents are well-known Czech artists themselves). Moderated by MoCP curator Karen Irvine, with additional panelist TBA.



Concurrent exhibition
The Anne and Jacques Baruch Collection
of Czech Photography:
Recent Acquisitions
January 29 - March 28, 2010

In conjunction with the Contemporary Czech Photography exhibition, the Museum of Contemporary Photography will highlight works from the Baruch Collection which were gifted to the museum in 2009.

The Czech Republic has an incredibly rich photographic tradition. At the turn of the 20th century, professional photographers such as František Drtikol and Josef Sudek joined their European counterparts in exploring experimental techniques to achieve artistic goals, in a movement that came to be known as Pictorialism. In the 1920s and 30s, a group of artists including Jaroslav Rössler and Jaromir Funke began creating highly experimental works influenced by French Surrealism and Russian Constructivism. Often combining elements of montage and abstraction, these avant garde masters became influential worldwide. After World War II, as artists were forced to grapple with pressures from the government, experimentation continued and imaginative and surreal photography grew strong underground and were used to subtly counter political ideology. Simultaneously, the social documentary tradition thrived, exemplified in the work of Viktor Kolář and Jindrich Streit, who documented the often trying social circumstances. The Baruchs promoted, sold, and collected it all.

Anne and Jacques Baruch began collecting work by Czech artists in 1968 during a visit to Prague and ended up becoming a window and a voice for the artists following Soviet occupation beginning the same year. Since many of the artists the Baruchs wanted to work with were not sanctioned by the authorities, Anne began smuggling art out of the country, often at great risk to everyone involved. Although government agents would seal her packages of officially sanctioned art before her departure, she would often alter or remake the seals with the help of artists in order to add more to her packages. She always traveled to Prague with a bright red Hartman suitcase equipped with a false bottom. On the way there she would fill it with art supplies that the artists could not buy, and on the return it would have artworks hidden inside. Once she was questioned by the FBI at her gallery, and once she was detained at the Prague airport and questioned at length. She even came up with a code that she used to correspond with artists and take notes about pricing and exhibition details. Through her travels Anne amassed a remarkable collection of both historical and contemporary Czech photography.

The exhibition includes works by Vaclav Chochola, František Drtikol, Josef Ehm, Jaromir Funke, Emila Medkova, Jaroslav Rössler, Jan Saudek, Adolf Schneeberger, and Josef Sudek

MoCP SPONSORS

The exhibitions, presentations, and related programs of the MoCP are sponsored in part by After School Matters; the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; the National Endowment for the Arts; US Bank, American Airlines, the official airline of the MoCP, and our members.

ABOUT MOCP

The Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), a resident organization of Columbia College Chicago, is the only museum in the Midwest with an exclusive commitment to the medium of photography. By presenting projects and exhibitions that embrace a wide range of contemporary aesthetics and technologies, the MoCP strives to communicate the value and significance of photographic images as expressions of human thought, imagination, and creativity.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Karen Irvine is the curator of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago. She has organized numerous exhibitions including: *Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography*; *Anthony Goicolea*; *Tracey Baran*; *Scott Fortino*; *Shirana Shahbazi: Goftare Nik/Good Words*; *Jason Salavon*; *Jin Lee*; *Paul Shambroom: Evidence of Democracy*; *Alec Soth: Sleeping by the Mississippi*; *The Furtive Gaze*; and *Camera/Action: Performance and Photography*, among others. She is a part-time instructor of photography at Columbia College Chicago. She received her MFA in photography from FAMU, Prague and her MA in art history from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Karel Cisář is a guest co-curator for *50% Grey*. He has been assistant professor of aesthetics and art theory at Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague since 2008. He curated the 5th and 6th Biennial of the Young Artists (2005 and 2008) and the Prague Biennale 2 (2005), as well as exhibitions with Hans-Peter Feldmann, Markéta Othová, Mathias Poledna, Florian Pumhösl and Robin Rhode. A contributor to *Camera Austria*, *Flash Art* and *Tema Celeste*, he is also the editor of *Text and Work: The Menard Case* (2004) and *What is Photography?* (2004). He has studied Philosophy at Charles University in Prague and University of Geneva.

PRESS CONTACTS

Audrey Michelle Mast
Web/PR/Marketing Administrator
Museum of Contemporary Photography
600 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60605
P: 773.459.5777
F: 312.344.8067
audrey.m.mast@gmail.com

Jeffrey Arnett
Manager of Development and Marketing
Museum of Contemporary Photography
600 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60605
P: 312.344.7779
F: 312.344-8067
jarnett@colum.edu

IMAGES:

Page 1: Markéta Othová
Untitled, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

Page 4: Jaroslav Rössler, *Untitled*, 1927
Gift of The Baruch Foundation