

Top to bottom:
Polák/Jasanský, From the series *Abstractions*, 1994-95, 41 x 30 inches, Gelatin silver prints
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

Polák/Jasanský, From the series *Brussels Sprouts*, 2007, 24 x 18 inches, Gelatin silver prints
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

Markéta Othová, *Illinois Institute of Technology*, 2006, 2 Gelatin silver prints, 62 x 43 inches each
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered January 29 – March 28, 2010

Štěpán Grygar
Jasanský/Polák
Markéta Othová
Michal Pěchouček
Jiří Thýn

OPENING RECEPTION
Thursday, January 28, 2010
5–7 pm

GALLERY TALK
Thursday, January 28, 2010
4 pm

Please join curators Karel Císař and Karen Irvine and exhibiting artist Markéta Othová for a tour of *50% Grey*.

FILM SCREENINGS
Masterpieces of the Czech New Wave
Ferguson Auditorium 600 S. Michigan Ave.

The Fireman's Ball (1967, 73 minutes)
Miloš Forman
Thursday, February 11
6 pm

Animation shorts by Jiří Trnka
including *The Hand*, 1965
Thursday, February 18
6 pm

The Czech New Wave is considered one of the richest eras of cinematic history. Made between 1964 and 1968, during a brief period of artistic freedom, these films are marked by a use of humor, tragedy, humanity, and surrealism often mixed with political commentary. *The Fireman's Ball* chronicles a real party thrown by a small-town fire department where nothing goes right. Considered a political allegory, the film was banned by the Czech government in 1969. Master puppeteer Jiří Trnka's stop action animation short *the Hand* examines freedom of expression and oppression and was banned under communist rule.

PANEL DISCUSSION
Out from Behind the Iron Curtain:
Czech Photography Past and Present
Thursday, March 11, 2010
6 pm
museum

Curator Karen Irvine will moderate a discussion on the topic of creating art before and after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. Panelists include: artist Štěpán Grygar, whose work is included in the Baruch Collection of Czech photography (see concurrent exhibition) and *50% Grey*, and who hails from a family of well-known Czech artists who all maintained careers through the political changeover, and Barbara Kalwajtyš, former director of the Baruch Gallery, who will tell the fascinating story of the Chicago couple who smuggled Czech photography out from behind the Iron Curtain.

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; U.S. Bank; American Airlines, the official airline of the MoCP, and our members. This exhibition has been planned in cooperation with the Consulate General of the Czech Republic in Chicago.



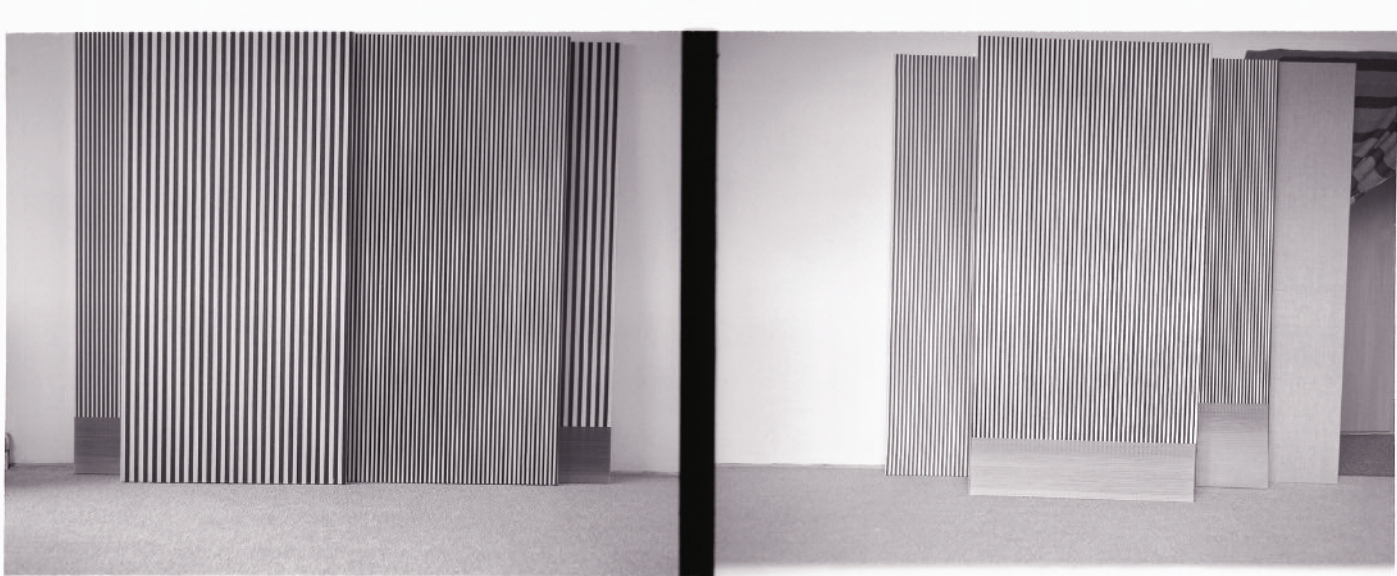
Cover:
Jiří Thýn
Untitled (Test Strip), from the series *50% Grey*, 2009
Gelatin silver print
27 x 39 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Hunt Kastner, Prague

Right:
Markéta Othová
Leçon de Photographie, 2007
7 Gelatin silver prints
16 x 23 inches each
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

Below:
Jiří Thýn, *Untitled, Composition No. 17*, 2007
C-print
16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Hunt Kastner, Prague



Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO



Michal Pěchouček, *Filmogram #1* (detail), 2007, 6 x 10 inches, Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Svestka Gallery, Prague

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered

In the Czech Republic—as in so many countries—photography took a while to come into its own. In the early twentieth century, professional photographers such as František Drtikol (1883–1961) and Josef Sudek (1896–1976) used alternative techniques to make personal work that was imitative of painting. This work, which became part of the international movement known as pictorialism, strove for beauty and atmosphere as a way to counter the mechanical coldness of photography. In the 1920s and '30s, under the democratic presidency of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Prague was a cultural crossroads and Czech artists were exposed to a variety of artistic movements including constructivism, futurism, surrealism, and the German Bauhaus. Avant-garde artists such as Jaromír Funke (1896–1945), Jaroslav Rössler (1902–90), and Eugen Wiškovský (1888–1964) made daring experiments with photography and celebrated its special characteristics. From angular nudes to geometric light studies, to collage and abstractions that adopted cubist elements popular in Czech art at the time, this group of avant-garde photographers collaborated with writers, poets, and painters, and they showed their photographic works in the context of painting, printmaking, writing, and graphic design.

It wasn't until after World War II that photography became fully accepted in Czechoslovakia as an independent genre. But it was mostly in the area of documentary photography that it excelled. Fine art photography often adopted a humanistic approach that privileged content over the mode of execution. Imaginative and surreal photography also flourished as a way to subtly counter the oppressive political ideology of communism. It wasn't until the end of the 1980s and '90s, after the Velvet Revolution that toppled communism, that photography was thoroughly questioned again as a means of artistic expression, and then usually in the works of visual artists, not photographers.

This exhibition brings together the work of six contemporary Czech artists (two of whom work collaboratively). All of these featured artists reflect on the materials of photography and find poetic resonance in a lack of obviously poetic subject matter. As the analog technology of photography fades away, these artists subversively employ a variety of photographic materials to investigate the potential for photographic veracity, and all of them push the idea of framing and selection to counter any perception of objectivity the medium might impart.

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. Although there is arguably an interconnectedness between artists working in the same city in a relatively small country, who know each other and have been taught and influenced by some of the same artists, it does not necessarily follow that these artists are primarily a product of their nationality. Rather, the exhibition only partly considers how the pallor of a historical circumstance—in this case

stereotypically “grey” post-communist society—might affect artistic production. More important, it may provoke a reconsideration of how a nationalist label affects an artist and an exhibition in a more general sense.

50% Grey also explores what the word “photography” brings to mind and what it means to “reconsider” it, and what parallels can be found among contemporary artists whose works deal with some of the most compelling questions artists can ask: Where is the edge between abstraction and representation? What is the relationship between time and space? Between two and three dimensions? What sorts of spaces in the imagination are opened up by paring down information and exposing the basics of photography? These concerns, among others, occupy these artists as they deal with ideas of fragmentation, time, space, narration, and perception in different, and extremely compelling ways.

Jasanský/Polák (Lukáš Jasanský, b. 1965; Martin Polák, b. 1966) began working together as photography students during the 1990s, at a time when they were both interested in departing from the extreme subjectivity that dominated Czech fine art photography. Instead they pursued a practice based on discourse, and for more than fifteen years have worked together on conceptual, technically straightforward projects. In 2007 they were commissioned to make a public art piece at the European Parliament in Brussels, a task that seemed antithetical to most of their previous work. But they took on the challenge and created the series *Brussels Sprouts* (2007), which uses irony to question the potential ability of artwork to embody nationality.

One of the first things that struck the pair about the European Parliament was the artwork already permanently on view. Gifts from various nations, the artworks are intended to represent examples of cultural production from each country, and as such often feel like political tools in their display of conservatism, symbolism, or grandeur. Displayed in an institutional setting and often awkwardly positioned in transitional spaces such as hallways and mezzanines, these works are usually presented in less-than-ideal viewing conditions. Jasanský/Polák level the playing field between the works by shooting them all in an unembellished, deadpan style and in black-and-white. The context of the surroundings is almost entirely removed, and like forensic pictures, the artworks are reduced to a minimal amount of information. This makes for a true democracy, where one cannot demand more attention than the others, perhaps a fitting metaphor for the desired diplomacy of the European Parliament. It is also an institutional critique in the manner of Louise Lawler's work that documents the contexts in which art is seen and consumed. Like Lawler's photographs, when Jasanský/Polák's parliament pictures are presented in a museum setting they bring added attention to the conditions surrounding the reception of artworks, and in so doing raise larger questions about the meaning and use of art.

Similarly, Jasanský/Polák's earlier series *Abstraction* (1994–95)



Štěpán Grygar, *Street (Prague)*, 2002, C-print, 23 x 31 inches, Courtesy of the artist
Štěpán Grygar, *Untitled*, 1991, Gelatin silver print, 23 x 19 inches, Courtesy of the artist

playfully questions the definition of art, while investigating photography's ability to straddle the representational and the abstract. By attempting to make images that resemble abstract compositions using everyday objects and settings, Jasanský/Polák underscore the accepted wisdom of what an abstract image looks like—usually a contrast of darks and lights, lines and shapes, that creates a feeling of dynamism. Color, often a significant and enjoyable attribute of abstract art, is siphoned out of the scene, subtly revealing our habit of visual pleasure derived from it and turning the pictures into a more controlled, almost scientific, endeavor. Irony resides in their critique, as they hint at the seeming absurdity of making abstract art with a medium best known for representation. They also turn our mental predilection to look for an image within an abstraction on its head, by creating sharp, representational images that reveal the idea of abstract form.

Compared to Jasanský/Polák, the photographs of **Štěpán Grygar** (b. 1955) sit in a middle ground where abstract and representational elements are equal and can each alternately hold more weight. In *Street (Prague)*, 2002, a black-and-white series 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 begins to fade away. The snowflakes are an indexical element for Grygar; they act as a trace and emphasize the impossibility of recording an instant, which we assume the camera does best. For it is not time that is captured, but rather a view of space that the snowflakes are traveling through without stopping. The element of time, for Grygar, is explored not as a chronological or cinematic phenomenon, but rather as something we experience as a mixture of knowledge, memories, and present experiences. Even though the camera's angle and position stay the same, there are infinite views all around it that are occurring and overlapping at once, destabilizing the idea of objectivity in photography and probing the fallacy of the photographer as passive observer. Grygar highlights his presence by using flash intermittently and changing exposure times. The concrete objects such as the street lamp and car are meant to emphasize the viewer's position, to implicate him or her as an interpreter of the scene. The abstract elements of his work, such as the snow flakes, are not about fragmentation as much as they are about a reduction of information and resisting narration.

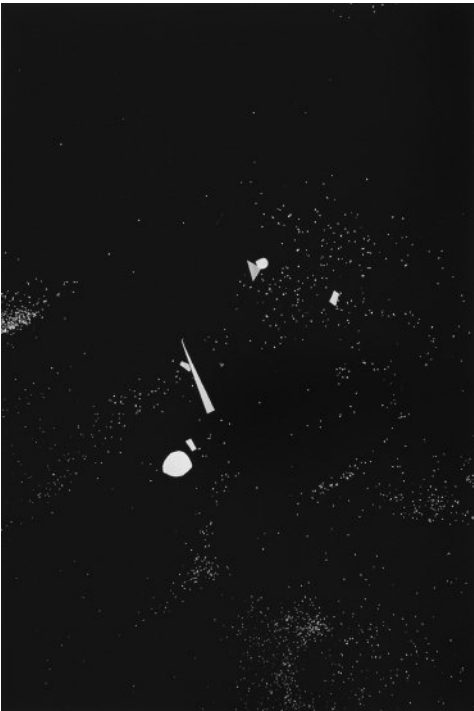
In his other works, Grygar builds images for the camera, employing simple materials such as flour, paper, and kitchen tools to create compositions that straddle representation and abstraction, much like James Welling's photographs of the early 1980s. Grygar adds unusual camera angles to create graphic images that defy the flatness of the photographic print, and to produce optically intricate compositions that harken back to the Czech avant-garde photographers of the 1920s and '30s. At the beginning of his career in the 1970s, Grygar took a modernist

approach and explored a specific set of aesthetics for photography. Later he began to inject irony into his work in order to emphasize the individuality of the viewer's experience. To this end, like Jasanský/Polák, he often uses scenes and objects readily at hand. Ultimately, Grygar 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 to question the limitations of photography. In his series that inspired the title of this exhibition, *50% Grey* (2009), he disrupts the illusion of photography by unveiling its science and materials. In one part of the series, he constructs “negatives” out of layered glass sheets silk-screened 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 but having no relationship to the colors, which are opaque. 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—an image does not faithfully record the world but rather profoundly transforms it through materials and light. His presentation strategy of having two distinct elements make up one piece hints at the importance of process and, perhaps, reception, and alludes to the instability of the notion of the artwork in general.

In other works from the *50% Grey* series, called *Test Strips* (2008), Thýn dissects images into stripes of grey using the method photographers employ in the darkroom to gauge proper exposure time. His title, *50% Grey*, recalls the idea of the perfect negative and print pursued by practitioners such as Ansel Adams (American, 1902–84). One of the thrusts of Adams's teachings about the negative is that although one ideally exposes for “middle grey,” each situation requires fine-tuning based on the conditions of the scene; there has to be room for intuition and experimentation. Thýn's negatives and *Test Strips* undermine the possibility of technical perfection by positioning photography as both an act of revelation and obscuration.

In the early 2000s, **Markéta Othová** (b. 1968) began creating black-and-white sequential images that communicate a sense of temporality, a practice that aligned her work with photography as it was employed by conceptual artists during the 1970s. An example is her *Untitled* diptych made at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in 2006. In this work, Othová records details of the interior of Crown Hall, the famous building designed by Mies van der Rohe that houses the university's architecture school. The left-hand image is of a ceiling tile shattered on the floor. The right-hand image presents a view of the suspended ceiling with one tile missing. Combining the photographs provides us with a view that could never be seen, both the floor and the ceiling at once. In this way she reconstructs the cognitive process



Jiří Thýn, *Postive-Negative*, from the series *50% Grey*, 2009, 5 x silkscreen on glass and 5 x gelatin silver prints, 16 x 12 inches each, Courtesy of the artist and Hunt Kastner, Prague

that would occur at the scene: one would look down at the fallen tile and then look up for its origin. Othová's choice to put the shattered tile on the left and the missing tile on the right, counter to the direction that we might sequence a storyboard, maps the trajectory of the tile in reverse and thus communicates a sense of duration.

In her more recent works, Othová focuses on the composition of images and works exclusively in the laboratory-like environment of her artist's studio. In this way, her reverse journey through the history of photography has brought her to the experiments of the photographic avant-garde of the 1920s and '30s. Like the avant-garde's representatives, Othová questions the very nature of the photographic medium and the stability of the visual world. Her *Leçon de Photographie* (2007), for example, 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 it. Thus, we end up seeing the object in the photograph only due to the difference bestowed upon it by photography. This is also made explicit in the *Untitled* diptych of a floral still life from 2008. Here, Othová captures one and the same bunch of flowers, first against a dark and then against a light background, with the object rendered 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, and the stability of the visual world is disrupted.

And finally, **Michal Pěchouček** (b. 1973) has spent most of his career making multimedia works that combine elements of film, painting and performance. Like Grygar and Jasanský/Polák, he is inspired partly by abstract painting and its potential to elicit emotion and intellectual questioning. He complicates the idea of abstraction by using photography, a medium thought of as best at recording “reality,” to shoot relatively minimal spaces with graphic qualities that relay a sense of optical illusion. His *Filmogram #1* (2007), for example, is a set of twenty-four diptychs of two views of walls and panels in an interior space, shot once every hour for an entire day, for a total of forty-eight exposures. The image pairs were made on a single roll of film with a 6 x 9 camera with a manual film advance. The unexposed gutters between negatives vary in width, creating black strips of inconsistent size that divide the two images. This strip is significant to the series as it indicates the artist's subjectivity and control of the operation of the camera, but paradoxically it also reveals his susceptibility to its mechanical, often unpredictable, nature. 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 the paper to light, thus circumventing the use of a camera and film. By making twenty-four exposures a day, and exhibiting them in a row, Pěchouček refers to the fact that movie film is generally exposed at twenty-four

frames per second. This cinematic quality endows the images with a sense of duration, something that is at odds with their flat, graphic composition and lack of living or moving subject matter.

Pěchouček's video *Pater Noster* (2005) is also an attempt to animate photographs in a very cinematic way. The words “Pater Noster” are 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. Pěchouček's video is divided into two parts—a right- and a left-hand segment, one going up and the other down, like a *paternoster* lift. The rotating still images show stacks of shelves containing a random assortment of items, creating multiple frames within frames that also fluctuate in distance from the camera. In the images a young man climbs a ladder and holds a picture of two sisters in matching confirmation dresses. A funny take on the idea of ascension, **Pechouček's** video is also a complicated meditation on time, space and perception. 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. The footage actually runs in two directions so that at some point in the cycle the imagery overlaps. This repetition underscores the idea that narrative is nonlinear, and cleverly reminds us of the reproducibility of photography—something also alluded to in the girls being dressed alike.

This exhibition represents a small, very specific slice of photography in the Czech Republic today, but it features artists who share very similar concerns. They all possess an authentic interest in an nearly obsolete analog medium, and use black-and-white materials to address and illustrate some of photography's most timeless questions concerning perception, reproducibility, time, and art itself. All of them place a great importance on working in series, and in the case of Grygar, Othová, Pěchouček, and Thýn use sequencing as a way to comment on narrative. All of the artists place a premium on installation and its potential to affect the content of the work. Finally, they all consider photography a process of suggestive abstraction, existing somewhere in the grey area between reality and illusion. At a time when analog photography is coming to its end, they use it to reconsider photography's limitations by bringing its inherent quality of abstraction—whether it be obvious or disguised as something representational—to the fore.

Karel Cisař, Independent Curator and Assistant Professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory, University of Art, Architecture and Design, Prague

Karen Irvine, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago