

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

**50% GREY:
CONTEMPORARY CZECH PHOTOGRAPHY RECONSIDERED**

**RECENT ACQUISITIONS OF CZECH PHOTOGRAPHY
FROM THE BARUCH FOUNDATION**

January 29 - March 28, 2010



Emila Medková, *Hand with Watch*, 1949, Gift of The Baruch Foundation

Additional Information for Viewers

This resource packet, which contains, curatorial essays, additional information on the artists and works on view, and questions for looking and discussion, was produced as a viewer supplement to the MoCP's current exhibitions. To schedule a free docent led exhibition tour, contact Allison Grant at agrant@colum.edu. For more information visit mocp.org.

The exhibitions, presentations and related programs of the MoCP are sponsored in part by After School Matters; the Lyloyd A. Fry Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a State agency; the National Endowment for the Arts; U.S. Bank; American Airlines, the official airlines of the MoCP, and our members. This exhibition has been planned in cooperation with the Consulate General of the Czech Republic in Chicago.

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered

Štěpán Grygar
Jasanský/Polák
Markéta Othová
Michal Pěchouček
Jiří Thýn

This exhibition brings together the work of six contemporary Czech artists all of whom live and work in Prague, Czech Republic. Instead of creating the brightly colored, large pictures that have come to dominate much of contemporary photography, these artists make works that are more understated, generally gelatin silver prints from negatives. They make photographs that hinge on the concept of abstraction and resist direct narrative. Through their explorations they extend many facets of the rich black-and-white photographic tradition of their country, especially the experimental avant-garde and surrealist works of the 20th century, examples of which are on view in a related exhibition on the museum's third level.

Although there are connections between artists working in the same city in a relatively small country—they 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. Considerations of how the pallor of an historical circumstance—in this case stereotypically “grey” post-communist society—might affect artistic production are only a part of this exhibition. More important is a self-conscious consideration of how a national label affects an artist and an exhibition in a more general sense.

50% Grey also explores what the word “photography” brings to mind, 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 fundamental elements of photography?

This exhibition represents a small, very specific slice of photography in the Czech Republic today, but it features artists who share similar concerns. They all possess an authentic interest in some of photography's most timeless questions concerning perception, reproducibility, time, and art itself. They all 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 reassess photography's limits by bringing its inherent quality of abstraction to the fore.

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50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered

Exhibiting Artists and Their Work

Jasanský/Polák (Lukáš Jasanský, b. 1965; Martin Polák, b. 1966)

From the *Brussels Sprouts* series, 2007

In 2007 Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák were commissioned to make public art at the European Parliament in Brussels. One of the first things that struck them about the parliament building was the artworks already permanently on view. Gifts from various nations, the artworks are intended as representative examples of cultural production from each country, and as such often relay a sense of conservatism, symbolism, or grandeur. Displayed in an institutional setting and often awkwardly positioned in transitional spaces, the works are usually presented in less-than-ideal viewing conditions. Jasanský/Polák level the playing field between the works by photographing them all in an unembellished, deadpan style. By bringing attention to the conditions surrounding the viewing of artworks, Jasanský/Polák raise larger questions about the meaning and use of art, in addition to the ability of artwork to embody nationality.

Jasanský/Polák (Lukáš Jasanský, b. 1965; Martin Polák, b. 1966)

From the *Abstractions* series, 1994–95

Jasanský/Polák's "abstractions" playfully investigate 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 missing, 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. Ultimately, Jasanský/Polák reverse our mental predilection to look for an image within an abstraction by creating sharp, representational images that reveal the idea of abstract form.

Štěpán Grygar (b. 1955)

In Štěpán Grygar's *Street (Prague)*, 2002, abstract and representational elements each hold weight. The snowflakes, for Grygar, are an indexical element; they act as a trace and emphasize the impossibility of recording an instant, which we assume the camera does best. 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 are meant to emphasize our position as viewer, to implicate us as an interpreter of the scene.

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. Grygar employs 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. Ultimately, Grygar is not interested in abstraction for the sake of ornamentation or decoration, but rather as a means for illuminating the perceptual process and resisting narration.

Jiří Thýn (b. 1977)
50% Grey, 2009

Jiří Thýn works with abstraction to question the limitations of photography. In his project that inspired the title of this exhibition, *50% Grey* (2009), he undermines the illusion of photography by unveiling its science and materials. In one series from the project, called *Positive-Negative*, he constructs “negatives” out of layered glass sheets silk-screened with areas 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. Thýn’s 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 project, called *Test Strips*, 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 ideas in Adams’s teachings 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 *Positive-Negative* images and *Test Strips* destabilize the possibility of technical perfection by positioning photography as both an act of revelation and obscuration.

Markéta Othová (b. 1968)

In the early 2000s, Markéta Othová 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. One image is of a ceiling tile shattered on the floor; the other of the suspended ceiling with one tile missing. Combining the photographs provides a view that could never be seen, both the floor and the ceiling at once. In this way Othová reconstructs the cognitive process that would occur at the scene: one would look down at the fallen tile and then look up for its origin.

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. Her *Leçon de Photographie* (2007) depicts images of 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 are able to see the object in the photograph only due to the difference bestowed upon it by photography. Similarly, in the *Untitled* diptych of a floral still life from 2008, Othová captures one and the same bunch of flowers, first against a dark and then against a light background. Combined in a single installation, we are invited to consider these two independent images merely as a positive and a negative.

Michal Pěchouček (b. 1973)

Filmogram #1, 2007

Michal Pěchouček has spent most of his career making multimedia works that combine elements of film, painting and performance. He is inspired partly by abstract painting and its potential to elicit emotion and intellectual questioning. Pěchouček 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. *Filmogram #1* is a set of twenty-four diptychs, shot once every hour for an entire day, for a total of forty-eight exposures. The images were made on a single roll of film with a 6 x 9 camera with a manual film advance; the unexposed gutters between negatives form black strips that divide the two images. These strips are significant to the series as they indicate the artist’s subjectivity and control of the operation of the camera, but paradoxically also reveal 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. 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.

Michal Pěchouček (b. 1973)

Pater Noster, 2005

In *Pater Noster* Michal Pěchouček animates photographs in a cinematic manner. 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—one going up and the other down, like a *paternoster* lift. A funny take on the idea of ascension, Pěchouček’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. The repetition of the footage underscores the idea that narrative is nonlinear, and cleverly reminds us of photography’s reproducibility.

Recent Acquisitions of Czech Photography From the Baruch Foundation

Legendary art collectors and dealers Anne and Jacques Baruch first opened their gallery in Chicago in 1967. During the gallery's thirty-five year existence, the couple mounted over one hundred exhibitions of art from Central Europe, many of which included works by Czechoslovakian photographers. The Baruchs first visited Czechoslovakia in August, 1968, during the infamous Prague Spring, a period of relative freedom and reform during the communist rule. They established life long friendships with many of the photographers they met and began promoting their works. Since these artists were not always sanctioned by authorities, the Baruchs learned how to effectively smuggle work out from behind the Iron Curtain. Eventually the couple amassed a remarkable collection of both historical and contemporary Czech photography.

The Czech Republic has an incredibly rich photographic tradition. At the turn of the 20th century, photographers such as František Drtikol (1883–1961) and Josef Sudek (1896–1976) joined their European counterparts in exploring experimental techniques to achieve artistic ambitions, in a movement that came to be known as pictorialism. In the 1920s and '30s, a group of artists including Josef Ehm (1909–1989), Jaromír Funke (1896-1945) and Jaroslav Rössler (1902–1990) 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, as seen in the work of Emila Medková (1928-1985) and Jan Saudek (b. 1935). The Baruchs promoted, sold, and collected it all.

The Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago is honored to be the recipient of many works from the Baruchs' collection of Czech photography. As a collecting institution, it is our duty to preserve and make works of art as accessible as possible through exhibition, print viewings, and our website. This, in our opinion, is the best way to pay tribute to the artists and to the democratic, curious spirits of art lovers like Anne and Jacques Baruch.

Karen Irvine
Curator

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Questions for Looking and Discussion:

1. Look carefully at the photograph or the series of photographs. Describe what you see.
2. What can you tell about how this picture or series of images was made? Consider factors such as the design of the photograph, camera angle, rendering of space, use of light, focus, materials and the output and presentation of the images.
3. Do any of these images appear to be manipulated in the darkroom, computer, or by hand? How can you tell?
4. What do you think this picture or body of work is about? Why?
5. Do any of the images seem to tell a story? If so, what is the story being told?

Other Questions to Consider:

1. How are concepts fundamental to photography such as rendering time and space, and exploring perception important to these works?
2. Do you see humor or irony at work in any of the images? Describe.
3. Is the concept of the veracity or “truthfulness” of photographs questioned in any of the works on view? Explain.
4. What connections do you see among various bodies of work within each exhibition?
5. Do you see any connections between the earlier works and more contemporary images in these two exhibitions? Do you notice any of the contemporary Czech artists “reconsidering” ideas or techniques explored by the earlier Czech artists?
6. Do you see any evidence of a shared culture, history, or nationality in the works of these artists? Describe.