

points of resistance that highlight instability, fragmentation and spatial effects for the most part are located in the realm of science fiction, where magic is near.

JAROSLAV RÖSSLER: CZECH AVANT-GARDE PHOTOGRAPHER

edited by Vladimir Birgus and Jan Mlcoch. Derek Paton, trans. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2004. 176 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-262-02557-4.

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The formation of the modern spirit in Europe prior to World War II would have been much impoverished without the presence of the Czech avant-garde. Seminal movements from constructivism to surrealism mark the debates begun and contributions made in the evolving complex of artistic values, whether revolutionary by design or by effect.

Central to this evolution are figures in Czech photography, who we in the West are finally encountering, Jaroslav Rössler among them. A creator of first importance to the mid-1930s, Rössler's oeuvre bypasses the usual conventions of type or style without, at the same time, obscuring his interpretation of them. Commonly associated with constructivist, abstract, poetist and informal tendencies throughout his career, Rössler emerges intact, a sensibility to be reckoned with, perhaps because of his verve in sustaining an anxious tone; a critical, if disarming, poignancy in questioning why and how. His touch remains his own, as does his means of envisioning, something that was not lost on Karl Teige (the principal theoretician of Devetsil, the leading avant-garde group prior to Czech surrealism), who in 1926 placed Rössler's work above that of Man Ray—when Man Ray held a commanding influence on Czech photography.

Unlike Man Ray, however, Rössler rarely achieved success or popular notice by name, despite his charming cosmetics and other ads during the late 1920s and early 1930s. No, Rössler's path was more erratic. Beginning in 1935 and for more than 20 years, in fact, he endured an eclipse brought on by a failed suicide attempt and an

extensive depressive aftermath. His public re-emergence in 1961 in the Prague quarterly *Revue Fotografie*, then in 1966, in Brno, where he appeared in the "Surrealism and Photography" exhibit with younger colleagues, is a tribute to his uniqueness during a time when cultural liberties in the former Czechoslovakia assumed mounting social importance.

Rössler made his first photos in 1917 as a teenaged apprentice in the studio of Frantisek Dritkol, an eminent Czech photographer. Having learned his trade there, along with a fascination for new mass technologies such as radio, Rössler cultivated several techniques to provide an image concurrent with the tensions of the era, when photography would soon claim its own space exclusive of other arts. His early use of bromoil (painting by brush on glass negatives) expanded to the complete negative and gelatin silver print, then collage, photo collage, photograms (he was perhaps the first Czech to make them) and photomontage, all done with great effect in black and white. In his last decades he created superbly evocative color images.

For viewers today, circa 2004, Rössler's independence remains perhaps his greatest distinction. We would do well to make of our encounter with Rössler—a poet of the constructed image rather than a constructivist, as Mathew Witkovsky notes in his essay on Rössler; designer of abstractions infected with ambiguity and psychological charge; integral to poetism during its ascendance; celebrated by surrealists; affected by informalism—a study of the deeper struggles of the imagination and the strategies required of artists in the world we face. In this regard, I do not take Rössler's refusal to sell his major work—for which he gained the most recognition, save for what he produced as a "professional photographer" in advertising (which even then brought him irregular compensation)—as a symptom of personal conflicts alone.

With Rössler, the photographic image becomes something more than a reflection of, or window into, the reality we face. It becomes a reality that reflects what we bring to it, opening up an interaction that rarely leaves us dispassionate. The recent release of the current monograph, with 178 illustrations (134 full-size) and six important essays and chronology, returns to us a world of light, shadow, people and

objects both quotidian and hybrid whose resonance remains.

Here, then, is Jaroslav Rössler, born 1902, died 1990.

WENDA GU: ART FROM MIDDLE KINGDOM TO BIOLOGICAL MILLENNIUM

edited by Mark H.C. Bessire. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2003. 230 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-262-02552-3.

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The problem with book reviews is that we are constrained by the meaning of words! There are many things in this world that words fail to describe adequately, and Gu's art is one of them. Interestingly, much of Gu's work consists of Chinese-like ideograms that are pseudo-ideograms deliberately created to transcend the traditional content of Chinese "words." As Gu says, "I felt such freedom, leaving behind the content of words" (p. 145). Having only words at my disposal, I will do my best to give the reader a feel for this magnificent book.

The book is wonderful to just glance through, but it is much more than a coffee-table presentation. It documents much of Gu's work, both through serious academic discussion and lavish color photographs. It also includes an insightful interview with this complex, unique artist by David Cateforis, professor of art history at the University of Kansas.

Gu was born in Shanghai and now lives and works in Brooklyn, with studios in Shanghai and X'ian. In the East he is Gu Wenda; in the West, Wenda Gu. This naming convention in a sense sums up Gu's work. He is constantly striving to juxtapose Eastern and Western symbols, not in a unifying sense but in transcendent third position.

Globalism has intensified ethnic difference on a local level while increasing ethnic unity on a global level. This environment . . . is referred to as "transculturalism" by Wenda Gu whose work tends to parody the role of cultural colonialist from a suspended cultural position as a citizen of a diasporan world (p. 12).

Gu, like David Suzuki and Isamu Noguchi, constantly deals with this "transculturalism," both on a personal and professional level. Gu has to consider not only minor changes in conventions such as names but also