

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

fundamental ideological differences on the most profound levels. Not long ago Gu, born in 1955, was painting large propaganda posters of Mao for the Red Guard in a totalitarian communist state. Now he is a leading avant-garde artist in the most capitalistic society on earth. The materials he has used in his art in the past, including menstrual blood and placenta powder, are challenging to say the least in either culture. He now uses human hair as his main medium and is sometimes known as “the hair artist.”

Gu collects human hair from many countries around the world, donated by over a million people so far. He then weaves it, compresses it into bricks, presses it into glue to make translucent hanging panels and uses it arbitrarily in his massive installations. Most of Gu’s work is monumental. His ongoing project *united nations* contains hair woven into a braid 5,000 meters long. The different hair colors, their origin and the different locations of the “work” all point to Gu’s notion of “transculturalism.” It also works as a metaphor for “the mixture of races that he [Gu] predicts will eventually unite humanity in a ‘brave new racial identity’” (p. 12).

Large ink on paper calligraphic or ideogram-style painting is usually combined with the hair components in his work. *United 7561 kilometres* is a new piece in the exhibition Wenda Gu: From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium, and is the 20th installation of his *united nations* series, which incidentally he began in 1993. This book is an accompaniment to this traveling exhibition.

The book’s rather enigmatic subtitle refers to Gu’s perception of the traditional Chinese middle kingdom (Chou empire, circa 1000 B.C.E.) and the new millennium of the biological era. The human body materials he uses represents the present and the calligraphic paintings the former.

As mentioned, this book has an interview with Gu, together with essays by leading Chinese academics, a fascinating exhibition history and bibliography and an academic essay by Gu himself. This artist’s vision is as grand and monumental as his creations; it most certainly could not be contained nor circumscribed by one culture or country.

The greatness of this artist and his work can only be hinted at in words. The best I can hope for with this review is that it encourages readers

to buy this book and also to seek out Gu’s exhibitions to experience “in the flesh.”

PERIODICAL

HYLE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF CHEMISTRY

Special Issue: Aesthetics and Visualization in Chemistry, edited by Tami I. Spector and Joachim Schummer. Includes Chemistry in Art: A Virtual Exhibition on CD-ROM. Vol. 9, 2003. illus. ISSN: 1433-5158.

Reviewed by Rob Harle, Southern Cross University, Australia. E-mail: <recluse@lis.net.au>.

This issue of *HYLE* is an exciting and bold attempt not only to explore the relationship of chemistry to art, but also, by extension, to address the current contemporary art/science liaison in some detail. I recommend this special issue as essential reading for *Leonardo* members and subscribers because it raises important questions regarding *Leonardo*’s fundamental project and *raison d’être*.

The journal is divided into two sections. The first comprises six scholarly essays, discussing “Aesthetics and Visualization in Chemistry”; these are followed by book reviews and reports. The second section has four essays, a very interesting and important dialogue (between a chemist and an arts critic/curator) and a CD-ROM containing a virtual art exhibition, *Chemistry in Art*—the artworks being specifically commissioned for this issue.

There are a number of fundamental questions involved in the current art/science liaison that as yet seem not to have been satisfactorily addressed. The most important of these are: (a) What is the difference between science and technology?; (b) At what level do artistic works created from a liaison with science become “art” rather than simply process diagrams, models and documentation of science processes? As David Spalding says, “I did not want to see sculptures of giant beakers” (p. 234); (c) In the liaison, artist and scientist must be equal partners—how can this possibly be achieved?

All the essays except one are written

by chemists or philosophers; the exception is by Elkins, who is an art theorist and historian. There are no essays by artists! Is this glaring omission because chemistry philosophers believe artists make art and do not (or cannot) seriously discuss theoretical issues? The editors/curators asked the artists to provide “a brief text in their art projects” (p. 228). This is not the same thing as a theoretical discourse by the artists about the “intersections of art and chemistry.”

The knowledge of what constitutes “art” is rather limited in most of the essays; quite often reference is solely to drawing or painting. Understandably, perhaps—why should a chemist know any more about art than an artist knows about chemistry? This point highlights question (c) above, in severe terms. These are the sorts of issues this journal raises if we read it closely from a critical perspective. This is not to say the essays in *HYLE* are of little value; on the contrary, they are extremely interesting, as well as scholarly, and discuss “visualization” in the past and contemporary “world of chemistry.” However, we need more if we are to develop a true symbiotic relationship between science and art. This symbiosis will mean crossing Wittgenstein’s notion of each discipline’s specific “language game” barrier.

The final entry in the journal, “Between Chemistry and Art: A Dialogue,” is a very open discussion between one of the editors, Tami Spector, and the art curator/critic David Spalding. This discussion *does* address some of the issues I raised above and *does not* tend toward the insularism of the earlier essays. Spector, to her credit, indicates that she learned much about art from her involvement in this project. This provides a clue to possible answers to some of the questions regarding the liaison of art and science. That is, both artists and scientists have to do some serious learning about each other’s practices, philosophies and methodologies.

The art works on the CD-ROM’s virtual exhibition—which includes images, installations and sculptures—are quite stunning: some strangely beautiful, some created specifically from scientific chemical processes and some commenting on chemistry’s cultural and social impact. I will not attempt to describe these works; the colors and forms in L.E. Last’s images, as an example, cannot be captured adequately with words. Readers will have