

# MODERNIST PHOTOGRAPHY IN CENTRAL EUROPE



by LVLE REXER

The litany of canonical figures in modern photography has changed little since the 1960s. The conventional history focuses on just three countries: France, Germany, and the United States; seminal figures such as Andre Kertesz and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy are inevitably appropriated by the countries where they eventually found a home. It is as if the entire swath of Central Europe, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, were simply blank. There are obvious reasons for this omission, of course, the primary one being the stranglehold of Soviet Communism (and before that Nazi occupation), which interrupted artistic traditions, destroyed archives, and sent artists migrating. But consider this: at the turn of the last century, Hungary was probably the most photography-obsessed country in the world. Even the king was a shutterbug and a gallery-goer. You could plausibly argue that modern photography gained its impetus from this part of the world, through Kertesz, Brassai, Martin Munkacsi, and many other expatriates.

The National Gallery of Art recently presented a selection of obscure works by a roster of artists many of whose names are scarcely familiar even to photography-historians, in an attempt to make a case for an artificial entity ("Central Europe") and an ambiguous concept ("modernity") that is defined by an apparently arbitrary slice of time. If one wanted a whipping boy for the recent tendency toward overspecialized, academic, arcane and self-justifying exhibitions that often plague museums in this country, *FOTO: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945* might be it. What was the curator, Matthew Witkovsky, thinking?

What he seems to have been thinking was to rewrite the history of photography, shame us all for our parochialism, and mount the most compelling and important historical exhibition of modern photography at a major U.S. museum of the last decade. The 150 photographs, books, and magazines in the exhibition bring to light a host of intriguing artists whose work is almost never shown in the United States. (A few galleries, including Howard Greenberg and Ubu in New York, and organizations such as the International Center of Photography have been the exceptions.)

The great frustration of an exhibition in which so much excavating needed to be done (Witkovsky estimates the show took four years to mount and had been in his thinking for far longer) is that only fragments can be displayed. Because "Central Europe" is a somewhat undefined designation, Witkovsky is compelled to set a context that includes significant German and Bauhaus work. A viewer new to this imagery can't begin to assess the impact and richness of the careers of, for instance, the influential photographers Jaromir Funke or Jindřich Styrsky, not to mention the peculiar Frantisek Vobecky, who photographed his own oddly appealing constructions of found objects.

Consider also Miroslav Hak, who in the 1930s used fixing solution, poured or spattered, to create abstract photographic artifacts, and later, during World War II, became a meditative flaneur, recording melancholy and arresting images of a devastated world. Witkovsky calls him, with some justification, "the most gifted of the lost generation of Czech surrealists."



The example of Hak raises two key issues. The first has to do with an explanation for the incredible outpouring of work in Central Europe. Witkovsky insists on the importance of an extensive photographic infrastructure in the region—not art galleries but teaching programs, professional studios, camera clubs, publishers, and exhibition programs. Hak himself learned in a professional studio, even though his work is distinctly "uncommercial," artistic and idiosyncratic. In now-forgotten photographic centers such as Brno, in Czechoslovakia, and Lviv, in Poland, photography's multiple identities as commercial outlet, art medium, political tool, and information vehicle were all intertwined. They were stimulated by a publishing world and a popular press that thrived on photo-narratives and experimental techniques. It was the broad recognition of photography as an industrial process cognate with technological progress and economic development that furthered its acceptance and dispersal. Photography (and of course film) was the wave of the future, and the split that American critics and artists traditionally ascribe to modern photography, between the popular and the personal, the artistic and the commercial, did not exist in Europe.

This raises the more profound question about the nature of photographic modernism, and modernism in the arts generally. Many of us carry a Museum of Modern Art view of photography, in which the medium "purified" itself about 1918, when it cast off its affiliations with painting and printmaking and began to examine the world strictly in terms of the complex of camera-photographer-world, a "new objectivity," a "new reality," a "new photography." But what was this new photography, this view of the future? Without this exhibition, it might be possible to maintain that it was embodied in the personal visions of the epigones of Kertesz and August Sander, and that forms such as photomontage, collage, and photogram were marginal. In fact, they were central.

Photography as practiced by Ladislav Berka, Imre Kinszki, Ern Berda, Moholy-Nagy, and hundreds of others participated in the broader examination of a non-objective reality, a search for evidence of things unseen and a communication of states and circumstances that lacked what the poet T. S. Eliot called "objective correlates." This exhibition underscores how deeply implicated photography was in all the major art movements, including Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism, and Constructivism. In this reading, Karel Teige and Moholy-Nagy emerge as major twentieth-century figures, and collage and montage as the central photographic innovation.

In fact, collage and montage—*The Cut-and-Paste World*, as Witkovsky has dubbed a section of this show—reveal why photography was intrinsic to representations of modernity. "Cut-and-paste" implies that images could be dismembered and reconfig-

ured to convey the chaotic or tendentious nature of political reality, the associative quality of psychic experience, and the shifting relations of social life. Mieczystaw Choynowski's 1932 *Ameryka* (America) is an emblematic example, with its jumble of skyscrapers crushing the chained wrists of (presumably) the American worker. Likewise the conventional reading of visual reality, to which photography is always uncomfortably bound, could be questioned and the cognitive nature of art reaffirmed. Photography sustained the general validity of these investigations by maintaining an umbilical relation with that consensual reality, with its codes of interpretation. Even at its most esoteric, abstract, or fragmented, photography was and is a common medium, an art of propositions and perceptions rather than originality and pure imagination.

This description, of course, does not begin to exhaust the complex nature of the response to social, scientific, political, and religious change that was modernity—a response that *FOTO* captures in all its contradictoriness. If the exhibition errs anywhere, it may be in not following its own logic far enough. In an effort to at least set some boundaries to the exhibition, Witkovsky falls back on a distinction that his own catalog text contradicts, between older, painting-inflected pictorialism and more graphic, formalist objective works. By that criterion, Josef Sudek is no longer modern (although he is represented) and montage ascends at the expense of impressionistic printing techniques such as bromoil, gum, and cyanotype. But unlike the Photo-Secession artists in the United States, who followed Paul Strand in repudiating the bastard hybrids they at first championed, many European artists never admitted the dichotomy. In Europe as in Japan, pictorialist impulses persisted and continued to nourish a symbolist vocabulary in photography, often jostling more "modern" attitudes in the work of a single artist.

One of the signature images of the exhibition is a photograph by Hungarian Imre Kinszki, who died in a concentration camp in World War II. It is a moody, atmospheric image, combining the impulses of both the Symbolist and the modern objectivist. The beautiful industrial structure, with its nineteenth-century detailing, extends dramatically into a mist-filled distance, where the opposite bank is invisible. Is that mist the future we look toward, whose shape we cannot discern, or is it the past we have left behind, whose memories and certainties, in spite of nostalgia and longing, already belong to a world that is impossibly distant?©

*FOTO: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945* was presented at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., June 10-September 3, 2007. The exhibition travels to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 5, 2007-January 2, 2008; the Milwaukee Art Museum, February 9-May 4, 2008; and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, June 7-August 31, 2008.