

Vladimír Birgus and Jan Mlčoch, eds. *Jaroslav Rössler: Czech Avant-Garde Photographer*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004. 164 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

After having recently released an informative volume surveying the accomplishments of Czech interwar avant-garde photography, the MIT Press has now published this monograph on one of the most important individuals of the period. The breadth of the earlier volume is well complimented by the depth of the current one: Rössler is both a tremendous artist and an intriguing case study for those interested in the history of the avant-garde. This in-depth presentation of his life and work is likely to provoke greater interest in this enigmatic figure.

Rössler was that rarest of birds: a shy avant-gardist. He did not flock to the cafés and had no flair for self-promotion. With the exception of his seminal *Opus I* (deemed by some art historians the first constructivist photograph anywhere), he destroyed most of his early work. He did eventually become a member of the leading Czech avant-garde group, Devětsil, but this was more because Devětsil approached him than because of any need for group affiliation on Rössler's part, and he drifted away from the group after a few years. As a result, Rössler – one of the most innovative and powerful photographers of the interwar avant-garde – did not take part in many of the landmark exhibitions of the period, such as the legendary 1929 “Film und Foto” exhibition in Stuttgart. The first Czech monograph on Rössler only appeared in 2001, quickly followed by a longer monograph in 2003, of which the present volume is a translation. The MIT Press is to be commended for contributing in so timely a fashion to this long-overdue acknowledgement of Rössler's significance.

One of the paradoxes of Rössler's work is that while it translates with great effectiveness the avant-garde idiom into the medium of photography, Rössler often defied the technological and aesthetic dictates that counted as *bon ton* among avant-garde circles. An example is his *Opus I*, from 1919. Rössler was at the time an apprentice in one of the major Prague studios (sent by his parents because of his poor performance in school) who had arrived from the provinces two years earlier. Without any direct contacts in the emerging avant-garde in Prague, this introverted seventeen-year-old produced a singularly striking image: a small jar sits nestled in the corner of the photograph, while most of the composition consists of large, diagonally cut pieces of cardboard that, together with blocks of light and shadow, divide the image into clean geometrical fields. The similarity to (or indeed anticipation of) constructivist design principles is hard to overlook; yet, at the same time, the shading and intimacy of the created spaces reveal the undeniable influence of late art nouveau pictorialism. This combination is not simply due to the earliness of the work: even in the mid-twenties, once he was connected with Devětsil, Rössler continued to produce abstract and semi-abstract compositions that often utilized "obsolete" techniques such as the bromoil print.

Indeed, in one of the essays included in the volume, Matthew S. Witkovsky suggests that the common comparison of Rössler's work to constructivism is an oversimplification. While constructivism explored the raw materiality of the world, Rössler's images often result in a ghostly dematerialization. Perhaps nowhere is this so evident as in the series of pictures from 1923 in which Rössler photographed streams and clouds of pure light: the objectification of the material medium of photography results in images that are dreamlike and ethereal. Here lies one of the great services of this book,

as it helps combat the temptation to see avant-garde photography as a straightforward illustration of more familiar trends. The translation to another medium produced different insights, unfamiliar consequences.

The range of images reproduced in the volume is broad. The most space, quite rightly, is devoted to Rössler's most productive years in Prague and Paris, from 1923 to 1935. (In 1935, shortly before becoming eligible for French citizenship, Rössler was arrested and extradited from France after photographing a demonstration. The precise circumstances of his arrest are unclear, but the incident had a profound effect on Rössler, who suffered a nervous breakdown and a decline in productivity that lasted well beyond the war.) This "heroic period" includes portraits (most clearly indebted to the pictorialism of Rössler's teacher, František Drtikol); semi-abstract compositions of details of radio equipment, the Eiffel Tower, and similar technological subjects; highly abstract compositions created from cardboard cutouts; photograms; photomontages; drawings and collages; as well as a generous selection of Rössler's elegant advertising photography. Included of course is Rössler's most famous image: the face of a young woman with a toothy smile, over which has been superimposed a composition of abstract shapes with a dark circle that appears like a monocle around the woman's eye. The veritable poster child of the Czech avant-garde, this image also graced, for example, the poster for the exhibition "On the Art of Fixing a Shadow," held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1989 to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invention of photography. Finally, the book also includes a number of Rössler's works from the sixties and seventies.

The high quality reproductions of this important body of work, as well as the detailed presentation of Rössler's artistic development in the five essays that introduce

the images, make this volume valuable for anyone with an interest in avant-garde visual culture.