

## Fotograf Gallery

### Jiří Toman: “...and the Water Rises”

28. 6. – 8. 9. 2023

Jiří Toman was fascinated by water. It formed not only the background of scenes from baths and beaches to the horizontal lines of panoramic pictures of the Polabí region or piers in the fog, but in many photographs it played the main role. Sometimes in the form of a wild mountain stream, sometimes as an ornamentally undulating curve that a wave draws on the sandy shore. Fotograf Gallery decided to exhibit a group of works in which Toman captured the details and compositions found at the Počaply weir, where he turned his lens not only to the foamy surface of the melting river, but also to the water in its solid state – to drifts, crags, and ice crystals. Toman's own enlargements are supplemented with digital reprints from the original negatives and two interventions by Šárka Zahálková.

The phrase used as the title of the exhibition was used by Jiří Toman when he met his friend Vlastimil Šebek and referred to John Walsh's book *Time Is Short and the Water Rises*. How little time Toman had been given was revealed in the spring of 1972, when he died shortly after his 48th birthday.

In Toman's estate, partly stored in the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny, we found over a hundred original enlargements of photographs taken at the Počáply weir in a paper box labeled by Anna Fárová. It seems it have been a work in progress rather than a final selection or complete set. Tentatively sorted into several groups, the contents of the box now lie in front of you and reveal how Toman proceeded in his work. Unlike his inspirations Josef Sudek or Edward Weston, Toman did not wait for the ideal shot, he did not have the situation firmly under control and did not put emphasis on the technical perfection of the resulting positives. It is as if the process of searching and finding itself, connected with a specific "tuning in" and opening to external stimuli, were more important than the images produced in the process.

That's not to say that the resulting photographs are not impressive. Toman managed to take a series of very artistic pictures in which the connection with reality is less important. The documentary dimension of the photographs is suppressed, knowing exactly what we are looking at is not essential – far more important is the specific imprinting on the photosensitive layer. His friend Šebek recalls that Toman was *"annoyed when they wanted to know where he took the shot, where it came from"*<sup>1</sup>, while the curator and author of Toman's monograph, Vít Bouček, emphasises that *"by not writing and not dating it, [Toman] made it clear that this was not a documentary, but a fine art photograph and an artistic statement"*<sup>2</sup>. While roaming around with his camera, Toman found moments and situations with aesthetic potential, which he enhanced by "framing" them, removing them from their ordinary context.

A series of photographs which depicts a female figure (perhaps Toman's partner Marie Šimková-Holoubková) playing with ice stands out from the rest of the set. The documentary aspects become more important; it seems that what took place in front of the camera had a special meaning. Thus the images, like many of Toman's other photographs,<sup>3</sup> hover between staged photography and a record of action. In addition, Vlastimil Šebek recalls a number of Toman's activities that were clearly aimed at intensifying the experience – whether it was floating candles down the Elbe or making patterns out of fallen twigs.<sup>4</sup>

It is this "intensification of experience" that connects the aestheticising photograph of the ice crystal with the recording of the immediate play in

<sup>1</sup> Vít Bouček (ed.), Jiří Toman: fotografie. V Pardubicích: Východočeská galerie, 2013, s. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Especially his series of New Year's cards and "Frame and Chair Games" also known as "Washing the Landscape".

<sup>4</sup> Bouček, s. 6.

the snowy landscape. In both cases, it is about creating a new relationship to the lived reality, a powerful experience – one induced by play, the other by a photographic view of the surrounding world. Looking through Toman's working enlargements, we encounter records of attempts to evoke such experiences, which can be read simultaneously as a guide and a call to adopt a similar attitude and to enliven one's own everyday life.

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The original enlargements are accompanied by digital reprints, some of which repeat the motifs presented on the tables, and some of which represent another position of Toman's work. The larger format and the form of the installation invite a different viewing – they lack the context of the series and are presented as more final, autonomous, and sovereign. They are an actualization of one of the many potentialities contained in the multitude of Toman's negatives and represent one way of understanding Toman's work.

Šárka Zahálková chose a different path, using her inputs to move Toman's photographs and reminding us of his involvement in animated film. In a flip book placed on a table near the window, Zahálková puts in motion Toman's picture of a plastic bag caught in a fence. In Louny we found it adjusted (probably by the author) on black cardboard in a pair with the figure of a child in foamy water. Unfortunately, we lacked a negative for this second photograph and therefore decided to use another image, thematically and compositionally related, so that the formal parallel between the light river foam and the surface of the torn plastic would be preserved.

Zahálková relates with a thraumatrope to one photograph from Toman's series dedicated to the trumpet – she separates the trumpet and the crumpled paper from the original photograph. However, if you turn the round plate several times, twist the rope on which it is attached, and then release the plate, you can observe their temporary reconnection in the rapid alternation of the isolated motifs. The motif of play, which was particularly emphasised by Jaromír Zemina in his interpretation of Jiří Toman's work, is made present here through the use of the principle of the optical toy and the reference to the "playful" series. Toman was fond of returning to this format, telling stories through it and trying out various visual shortcuts and puns within its framework.

Viktorie Vítů

## Jiří Toman's Legacy

The estate of Jiří Toman (March 22, 1924 Pardubice – April 10, 1972 Hradec Králové) is a constant challenge for research and interpretation. It has for the most part been deposited in the Gočár Gallery in Pardubice and the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny, from whose holdings comes the intimate selection of works made available at the Fotograf Gallery. Toman recapitulations are often held, especially on the anniversaries of the birth and death of the artist. The House of the Lords of Kunštát in Brno put together the first summary exhibition Jiří Toman in the spring of 1973. Its preparation was undertaken by a circle of friends, including the theoretician Jaromír Zemina, who wrote the retrospective text in the catalogue. He placed the multifaceted artist among the most distinctive personalities of culture at that time. Toman is not only the originator of an extensive and insightfully innovative photographic oeuvre centered on the 1950s and 1960s. He produced photomontages, collages, drawings, photographs and peculiar objects... He anticipated trends such as arte povera and land art... He was appreciated as a conceptualist and pioneer of action art, who from the mid-1950s at the latest documented the realisation of his plays and performances photographically. He was also involved in applied graphics and book illustrations, as well as writing poetic themes, scripts, and layouts for the artistic conception of internationally acclaimed animated films. He initiated and organized the Artchemo symposium in Pardubice in 1968 and 1969.

The catalogue, published half a century ago, opens *Own biography*, demonstrating Toman's ability to distance himself from the existential circumstances already complicated by his deployment during the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands during World War II: *"Before I finished Protectorate high school, I was turned into a total worker for the years 1943–1945. In 1946, 1947, 1948 I successfully passed the exams at FAMU, specialization camera. For financial and other reasons, however, I could not pursue my studies. Josef Sudek has a great contribution to what I know of photography. [...] Since 1945, I have been a clerk, soldier, calculator, maintenance worker, orthoptist, photographer, recruiter and publicity manager."*<sup>5</sup>

In the spring of 1992, art historian Anna Fárová put in Toman's retrospective *"the main emphasis [...] on photography, from which everything else unfolds [...]. Bravura vision, extraordinary vision, these are the epithets of the work, a photographic work that is monumental and that gives Czechoslovak photography a new*

<sup>5</sup> Jaromír Zemina, Jiří Toman. Brno, Dům umění města Brna 1973.

Compare Jaromír Zemina, Hry a přání Jiřího Tomana. Revolver Revue # 25, 1994, pp. 7–45.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Fárová, Jiří Toman / Fotograf. Roudnice nad Labem, Galerie moderního umění 1992.

Compare Anna Fárová, Jiří Toman. Post # 4, 1991, pp. 16–21.

<sup>7</sup> Vít Bouček, Jiří Toman. Panoramatické fotografie ze sbírek Východočeské galerie v Pardubicích / Panoramic Photographs (from the East-Bohemian Gallery's collection). Pardubice, Východočeská galerie v Pardubicích 2004.

Vít Bouček – Maritín Dostál, Jiří Toman / fotografie / photographs. Praha, Pražský dům fotografie 2006.

Vít Bouček, Jiří Toman / fotografie. Pardubice, Východočeská galerie v Pardubicích 2013.

*dimension for the 1950s and 1960s. It has no parallel, it is unique, because more than photogenicity, it encodes a poetic imagination and an attitude of life: the wonders of the elements and the purity of thought are combined in the unceasing joy of discovery."*<sup>6</sup>

Book sections through the photographic part of Toman's estate were published by Vít Bouček, the then curator of the East Bohemian Gallery in Pardubice, for three differently conceived exhibitions; however, he could not use the Louny funds at that time. The director Martin Fišer, who is preparing an experimental film to make the still surprising quality of this remarkable legacy more visible, has gained a comprehensive overview of Jiří Toman's contributions. All of Toman's work seems to have been experimental and pioneering in nature; it therefore continues to resonate in an inspiring way.

## Josef Moucha

works:

1: Jiří Toman, untitled (self-portrait in snow), 1950s-1960s, author's enlargements, on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

2-6: Jiří Toman, untitled (photographs taken neary Počaply weir), set of author's enlargements, 1950s-1960s, on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

7: Šárka Zahálková, flipbook, 2023

8: Jiří Toman, untitled (negatives described as "Kry" [Floes]), digital print from negatives, 1950s-1960s, negatives on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

9, 10: Jiří Toman, untitled (negatives described as "Mraky" [Clouds/Mass]), digital print from negatives, 1950s-1960s, negatives on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

11: Jiří Toman, untitled, digital print from negatives, 1950s-1960s, negatives on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

12, 13: Jiří Toman, untitled (negatives described as "Krkonoše" [Giant Mountains]), digital print from negatives, 1950s-1960s, negatives on loan from the collection of Galerie Benedikt Rejt in Louny

14, 17, 18, 19: Jiří Toman, untitled (negatives described as "Panorama"), digital print from negatives, 1950s-1960s, negatives on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

20: Jiří Toman, untitled (Trumpet series), 1950s-1960s, set of author's enlargements, on loan from the collection of the Benedikt Rejt Gallery in Louny

21: Šárka Zahálková, thaumatrope, 2023

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#### ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

guided tour (in Czech) with the curators will take place on 7 September  
at 18:00

Fotograf Gallery  
[www.fotografgallery.cz](http://www.fotografgallery.cz)

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