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Arun Misra interviews: Clare Grafik and Pavel Vančát on
The Works and Influences of Jan Svoboda

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The Works and Influences of Jan Svoboda Arun Misra, Clare Grafik & Pavel Vančát

Arun Misra talks with Clare Grafik, Head of Exhibitions at The Photographers' Gallery and Pavel Vančát, Curator, on the works and influences of the pioneering Czech photographer, Jan Svoboda (1934–1990).

Clare and Pavel curated the 2020 'Against the Light' exhibition at The Photographers Gallery, London.

Svoboda sought to redefine the language and perception of photography, deconstructing the process and form, playing with subject matter and presentation and considering the medium in relation to painting and sculpture, and within the traditions of Symbolism, Romanticism and Modernism. His self-reflective, speculative works paved the way for wider experiments with photographic appropriation and mark him out as a pioneer of conceptual photography.

Svoboda distanced himself from the Czech photographic establishment and famously declared: I am not a photographer. He had a greater affinity with artists and in 1963 was accepted as the only photographer into the artist collective Máj. This was one of the few avant-garde artists groups in Communist Czechoslovakia at the time and which brought him into contact with other important Czech contemporaries working in painting, sculpture and installation.

We discuss his legacy and the extent to which he was successful with his photographic approach.



above: Hansgert Lambers, *Jan Svoboda*, around 1975
left: Jan Svoboda, *An Attempt at the Ideal Proportion III*, 1971,
Collection of Miroslav Velfl, Prague © Artist's Estate

Arun Misra *Can I start by asking you, Clare, what first drew you to the works of Svoboda? What was it that you saw that you wanted to explore further?*

Clare Grafik I was first introduced to the work of Jan Svoboda by Pavel Vančát, the show's co-curator, in 2012. It was, by coincidence, a time when I was researching for a group exhibition on photography and collage and Svoboda's work stood out to me as something which felt very unlike other photographic practices that explored ideas around the materiality of the medium. We featured three Svoboda works as part of the 'Perspectives on Collage' exhibition in 2013, and even then it felt there was a lot more to understand about what Svoboda was trying to do. When Pavel and Jiří Pátek, Photography Curator at the Moravian Gallery in Brno (who hold the largest public collection of Svoboda's work), produced the seminal survey and catalogue of his work 'I'm Not A Photographer' in 2015, it became clear that this should be something The Photographers' Gallery should try and do too. It felt like there was something really precise yet understated about Svoboda's project that deserved to be seen and thought about a bit more.

AM *Pavel, you have said that Svoboda's work was inspired by modernist painters and in particular Paul Cézanne. Svoboda's photograph, 'Three pairs' (1985) perhaps alludes to this influence. Why do you think Svoboda was drawn to Cézanne? Do you see any traces of Cézanne's vision and techniques in Svoboda's works?*

Pavel Vančát Svoboda's main concern was to elevate photography to the realm of traditional visual arts, in line with the work of his friends and peers who were predominantly painters and sculptors. Therefore he tried to build up the pictorial plane in a similar way to modern painters, thinking not only about composition, but also about the light, contrast and even about the material substance of his exhibition prints. Cézanne, as the founder of modern painting, was a natural inspiration for Svoboda. In his estate there are not only many books on Cézanne, but also a large collection of postcards and magazine

cut-outs with his works, often reproduced in black and white. A direct quotation can be found in Svoboda's First Photograph for an Unknown Lady (1974), showing one of the postcards among other postage items on a table desk.

AM *Where did Svoboda get his ideas and inspiration from? How would you describe the cultural environment in Prague that helped or hindered his development?*

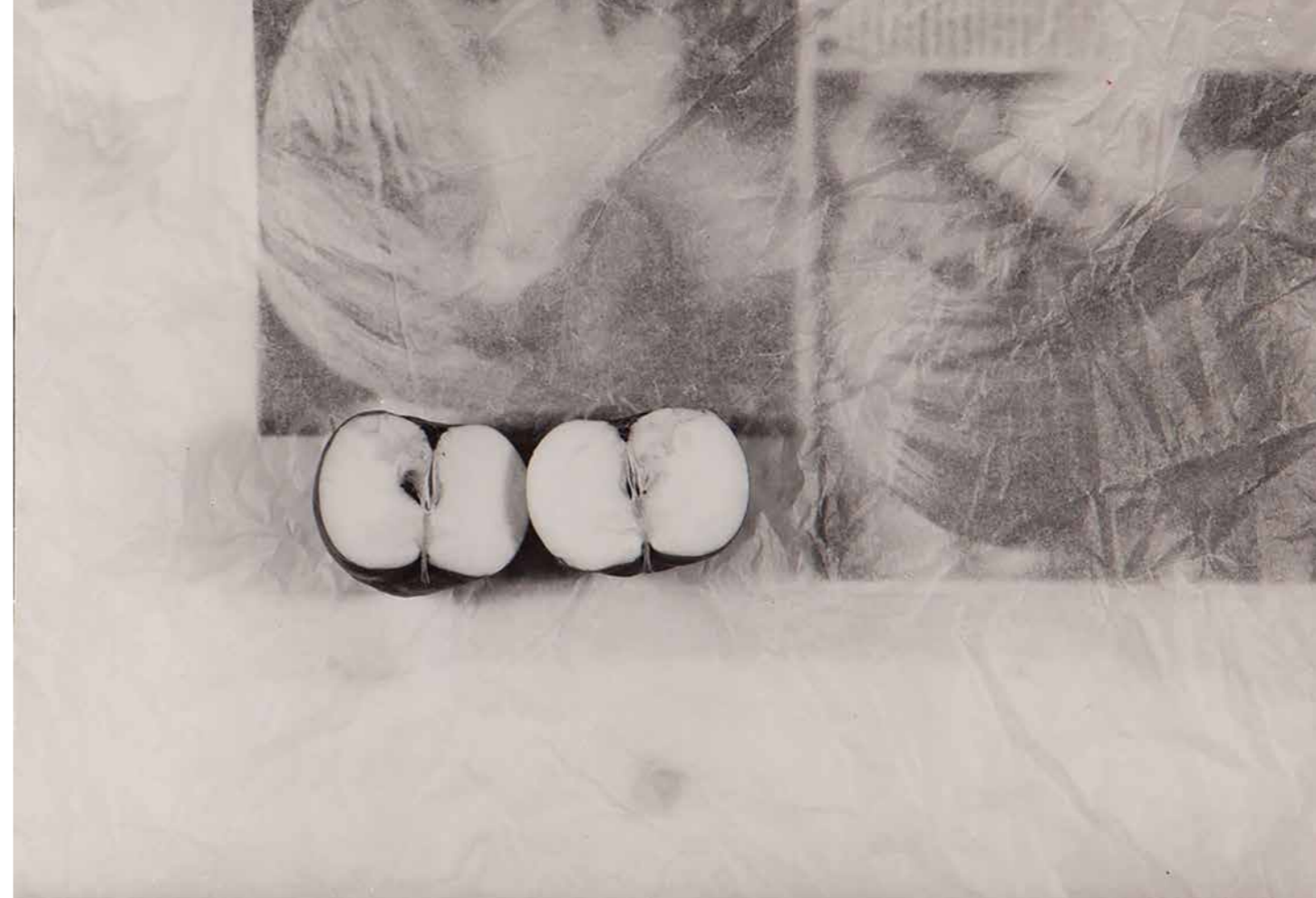
PV Svoboda's artistic inspiration emerged from various (and often contradictory) sources, combining Symbolism, Romanticism, Existentialism, post-war Lyrical Abstraction and Conceptual Art. His roots are coming from poetry and literature (he had a special interest in Russian and French literature), but he expanded them into visual art thanks to his peers, eminent artists of the 1960s generation like Stanislav Kolíbal, Zdeněk Palcr, Jan Švankmajer and many others.

AM *Many commentators have said that Svoboda was ahead of his time in two important ways. Firstly in the expression of materiality of the photograph and secondly in his minimalist approach. Can you comment on what materiality meant to him and how he expressed it?*

CG Svoboda tried to create photographs not as freely reproducible images, but as solitary objects with distinctive individual qualities. Therefore, he even insisted on specific sizes for each photograph, ideally fitting to the subject matter - with some of his images reaching over one metre, far beyond the usual praxis of his times. Svoboda also developed his own unique method for presenting his works, mounting them onto thick card and backing them with metal rods so they stood out 'floating' from the wall, creating an almost sculptural quality to each piece.

AM *Following on from that can you comment on minimalism in his works?*

CG His works can be considered as minimalist, but in several interviews, Svoboda openly neglected this label, stating that he simply sticks to a 'less is more' approach. Moreover, his works mix



Jan Svoboda, *Three pairs*, 1985,
Courtesy Collection of Miroslav Velfl, Prague
© Artist's Estate

minimalist influences with very personal symbolic meanings or comment on the photographic process. One of his more radical moves, which feeds into this, was to treat both sides of the photograph as equally worthy subjects, 'The Other Side of the Photograph' (1969) or 'Imprint' (1975-76) offer the viewer the reverse side or empty space left by the image.

AM *Tonality and the use of light and shadow is quite prevalent in his works. He seems to be developing his own unique aesthetics at the peak of this creative period (1969-72). How was this received in the art and photographic circles in Prague at the time?*

PV Since his first solo show in 1968 in the small, but progressive and prestigious, Galerie na Karlově náměstí (Gallery on Charles' Square) in Prague, we can say that Svoboda was fully recognised by his artistic contemporaries. For some of them he was also a masterful documenter of their own artworks – particularly sculpture, which also influenced his artistic outcomes. In 1983 he was offered the chance to participate in a comparative exhibition with his photographic hero Josef Sudek, heralding Svoboda as his natural successor. On the other hand, his personal ambitions and material conditions were more and more complicated from the late 1970s onwards, probably leading to his premature end.



AM *Svoboda was hugely inspired by fellow Czech photographer, Josef Sudek. Can you talk about this relationship and how it influenced his works? Which particular works come to mind?*

PV Josef Sudek was the only photographer whom Svoboda fully respected, and we can see this particularly in his early works before 1965 such as the symbolic 'Fuchsia, Annunciation III' (1959) and the evocatively titled still life 'Against The Light (Literally)' (1964) (from which the exhibition drew its title). Svoboda owned several photographs by Sudek, but their relationship was very deferential from Svoboda's side. During his first solo show in 1968, Svoboda waited several days for Sudek to attend his exhibition, and was enthralled to have his work recognised by his artistic hero.

AM *His titles are very poetic and extend the feeling and meanings of his photographs. Looking back from where we are now his practice of pairing poetic texts and images seem to have been well ahead of his times. How did he fuse poetry with photography and what impact did this have at the time?*

CG Before starting with photography, Svoboda wrote poetry from his teenage years onwards. His first photographs were initially conceived to accompany - even illustrate - his poems, so the images were not thought of by him as solitary or stand alone artworks. While he did discard writing poems later on, his early literary career remained in his practice through his titles, giving the works often more specific meaning, sometimes poetically mysterious, as in early works 'Phantom II' (1963) or 'Melancholy' (1963), sometimes sharply analytical, but always being an

important part of his work. The image title 'Picture That Will Not Return XXXV' (1972) quotes closely from an earlier poem Svoboda wrote in 1956-57.

AM *The 'Against the Light' exhibition at the Photographers Gallery was a triumph of showcasing Svoboda's creativity and creations. How would you describe his legacy?*

CG We were lucky enough to get some of the best examples of Svoboda's work lent to us for this exhibition from the Moravian Gallery in Brno, the Archive of Modern Conflict in London and other committed private lenders to ensure the show really reflected the quality and focus of his artistic project. Svoboda remains an influential figure for contemporary Czech photographers. His legacy can be felt less through artists quoting his 'style' than through ideas around the radical approaches to the medium developed during the last 30 years in the works of Markéta Othová, Lukáš Jasanský/Martin Polák, and Jiří Thýn. More broadly, we hope that The Photographers' Gallery exhibition brought him a deservedly wider audience who can appreciate how very contemporary his practice was at the time and still feels now.

AM *If Svoboda was a teacher of photography now what do you think he would say to the current generation of photographers?*

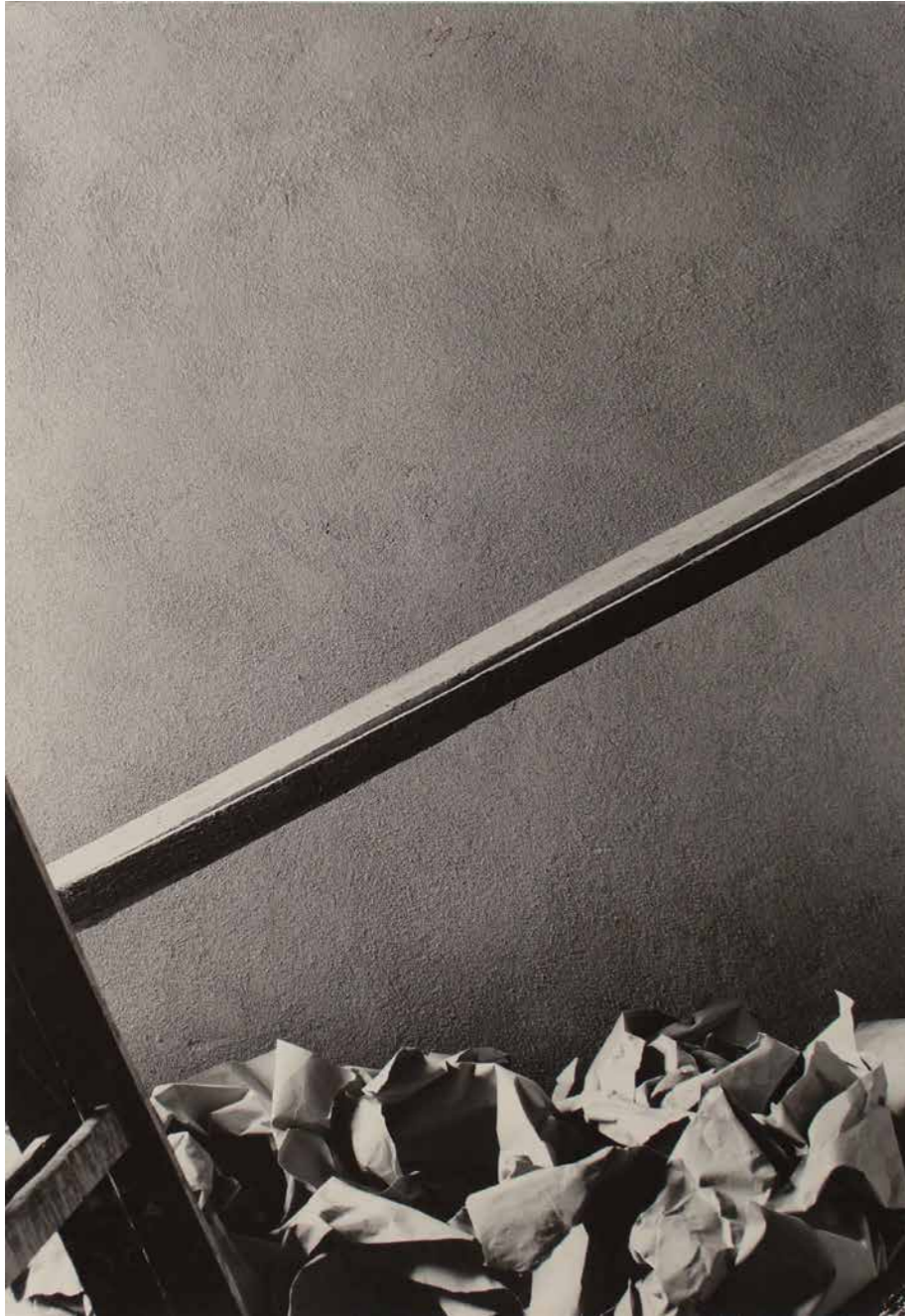
PV I would say he would understand well the contemporary conditions of pictorial "liquidity" and appropriation, which is predicted in many of his works. And that 'less is more' still applies!

Clare and Pavel, many thanks for talking to me and sharing your thoughts with our readers.

Jan Svoboda, *Against the Light (Literally)*, 1964

Courtesy Moravian Gallery, Brno

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Jan Svoboda, *Photograph for Stanislav Kolibal*, 1971
Courtesy PPF Art, Prague
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