

JAN SVOBODA: AGAINST THE LIGHT

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Against the Light marks the first major UK presentation of Czech photographer, Jan Svoboda (1934–1990) since his first solo exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery in 1982. His groundbreaking experiments with form, rank him as one of the world's pioneers of photographic appropriation and forerunners of conceptual photography. Svoboda's work sought to redefine the language of photography in relation to painting and sculpture, bridging the traditions of Symbolism and Romanticism with the conceptual and self-reflexive tendencies of late Modernism.

After training to be a stage designer as a young man, Jan Svoboda began experimenting with photography in the late 1950s, initially using it to illustrate his own poetry before focusing on it as a primary concern. Strongly inspired by fellow Czech photographer, Josef Sudek, Svoboda's early work encompassed systematic observations of suburban Prague, as in the series, *View of the Gasworks* (1957-58), as well as metaphysically charged still lifes.

In 1963 Svoboda was accepted as the only photographer into Máj, one of the few avant-garde artists groups in Communist Czechoslovakia, which brought him into contact with other important Czech contemporaries working in painting, sculpture and installation such as Zdeněk Palcr, Stanislav Kolíbal and Jan Švankmajer. By the end of the 1960s, Svoboda's work – almost completely studio-based – began to interrogate the boundaries of the photographic image itself. Series' such as *Halves*, *An Attempt at an Ideal Proportion* or *An Attempt at Expressing Space* played with process, composition and tonality while questioning the physical substance of the photographic work.

Between 1969 and 1972, Svoboda produced some of his most radical and philosophically self-reflexive works, often directly quoting and deconstructing his own images. For example, *The Other Side of a Photograph* (1969), or series' including *Picture That Will Not Return* and *Prepicture*, show him breaking conventions of presentation and relativity by displaying the reverse side of an image, or capturing piles of photographs, sometimes ripped up on his studio floor. He also developed his own method for exhibiting his photographs, mounting them on card and iron rods creating a floating effect on the wall.

The Photographers' Gallery
16–18 Ramillies Street
London W1F 7LW

*44 (0)20 7087 9300
info@tpg.org.uk
thephotographersgallery.org.uk

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After his supreme creative period, Svoboda rarely photographed only occasionally between from 1972 until his untimely death in 1990, only a few weeks after his country was liberated from Communism.

The exhibition, co-organised with The Moravian Gallery in Brno, shows around 50 vintage works in original sizes and adjustments, which retain the sense of his photographic works as unique sculptural objects. Some of the images are returning to The Photographers' Gallery after 38 years, to commemorate the first ever exhibition of Jan Svoboda in the UK staged at the Gallery in 1982. The presentation includes rich biographical material, illuminating Svoboda's life through documents and personal photography, as well as video interviews.

The exhibition is curated by Pavel Vančát, with Clare Grafik, Head of Exhibitions at The Photographer's Gallery.

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Press Contact:

For interview requests, press materials and more information contact:

Grace Gabriele-Tighe or Harriet Black at Margaret PR:

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7739 8203

Email: grace@margaretlondon.com / harriet@margaretlondon.com

Notes for Editors:

Artist biography available on request

About The Photographers' Gallery

The Photographers' Gallery opened in 1971 in Great Newport Street, London, as the UK's first independent gallery devoted to photography. It was the first public gallery in the UK to exhibit many key names in international photography, including Juergen Teller, Robert Capa, Sebastiano Salgado and Andreas Gursky. The Gallery has also been instrumental in establishing contemporary British photographers, including Martin Parr and Corinne Day. In 2009, the Gallery moved to 16 – 18 Ramillies Street in Soho, the first stage in its plan to create a 21st century home for photography. Following an eighteen months long redevelopment project, the Gallery reopened to the public in 2012. The success of The Photographers' Gallery over the past four decades has helped to establish photography as a recognised art form, introducing new audiences to photography and championing its place at the heart of visual culture. www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk

Visitor Information

Opening times: Mon – Sat, 10:00 - 18:00; Thu, 10:00 - 20:00; Sun, 11:00 - 18:00

Admission: £5 / £2.50, free from 17:00 daily, free Thursday Lates

Address: 16-18 Ramillies Street, London W1F 7LW

Nearest London Underground Station: Oxford Circus

T: + 44 (0)20 7087 9300

E: info@tpg.org.uk

W: thephotographersgallery.org.uk