

An Ogling Subversive With a Homemade Camera

The photographs are blurry, skewed, badly printed and in terrible condition: dog-eared, scratched, spotted and encrusted with who knows what. They all show girls and young women, in streets and public parks, going about their business and mostly unaware of the camera.

ART REVIEW

KAREN ROSENBERG

Whose work is this, with its peculiar echoes of Gerhard Richter, Richard Prince, Ron Galella, Garry Winogrand and Humbert Humbert? It's the private archive of Miroslav Tichy, a Czech who took the pictures during the 1960s and '70s in his hometown, Kyjov, and now has a solo show at the International Center of Photography.

Mr. Tichy, now in his 80s, was merely a local curiosity until the eminent curator Harald Szeemann included an exhibition of his photographs in the 2004 Seville Biennial. That presentation won the New Discovery Award, and the Tichy Ocean Foundation was established on the his behalf. The photography center's show, "Miroslav Tichy," is his first at an American museum, and while it's mildly disturbing, it's also intensely fascinating.

The exhibition, organized by the center's chief curator, Brian Wallis, includes some 100 mostly unique prints, as well as homemade cameras and other crumbling ephemera from Mr. Tichy's house in Kyjov. The museum is also screening "Tarzan Retired," a 35-minute film from 2004 by Mr. Tichy's longtime neighbor and biographer, Roman Buxbaum.

You might call Mr. Tichy (pronounced TEE-kee) an outsider artist if it weren't for the inconvenient fact that he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague and was for a time a celebrated painter. His photographs may look naïve, but they're the product of a carefully orchestrated series of missteps that begins with crude, homemade cameras. As he says in the film, "If you want to be famous, you must do something more badly than anybody in the entire world."

His photography is also much more subversive than Westerners might perceive. It exemplifies the nonviolent dissent perfected by Czech students and artists during and after the Soviet inva-

Miroslav Tichy

International Center of Photography

sion of 1968, when the nurturing Prague Spring was followed by a crackdown on free expression.

Mr. Tichy was marked from the beginning: he was a nonconformist with a history of mental illness, and a former member of the Brno Five, a group of painters who broke with the state-sanctioned Socialist Realism of the postwar years. He was monitored and, from time to time, institutionalized.

He did not take up photography until the late 1950s. (All of his pictures are untitled and undated; those in the show are thought to have been made between 1965 and 1980.) When he did, he quickly moved from nostalgic landscapes in the style of Josef Sudek to his fleeting portraits of the women of Kyjov.

Allowing himself three rolls of film a day, he wandered the streets performing his own per-



TICHY OCEAN FOUNDATION

Above, one of the images captured by Miroslav Tichy, a Czech, in his hometown, Kyjov. Above right, the camera he assembled.

sonal version of the Czech government's surveillance program. He was a stalker of pretty girls with a secret agenda.

Clearly Mr. Tichy admired legs, and backsides, often cropping the image to show just the lower body. But he did more than ogle. Many photographs show

conspiratorial pairs of women: gossiping, telling secrets or otherwise staking out bits of privacy in public.

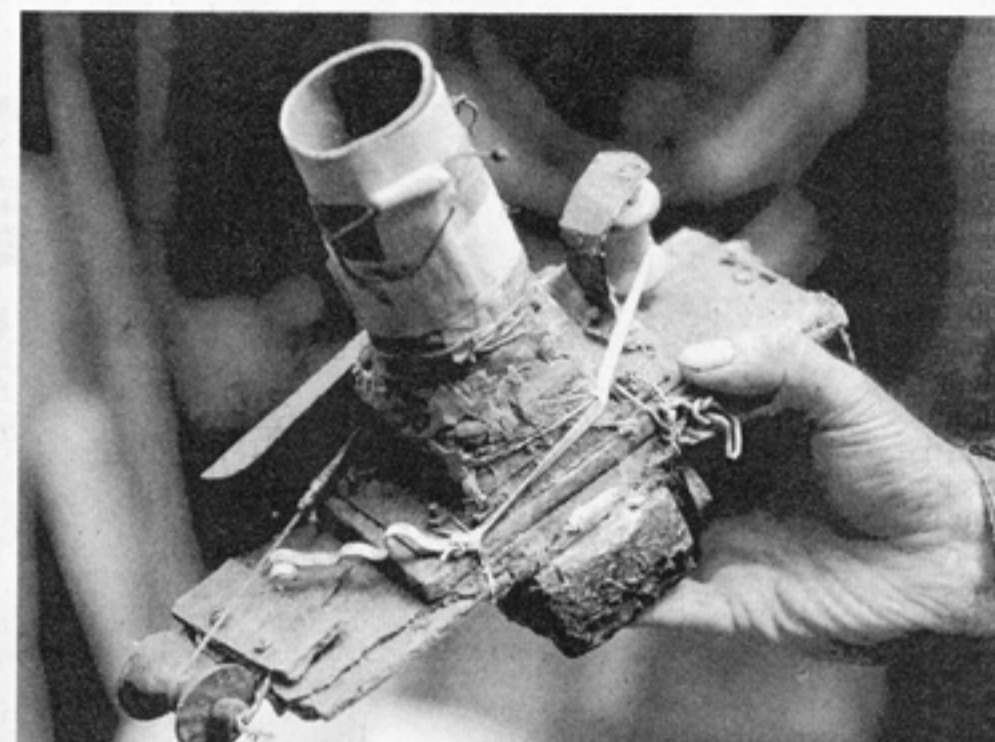
He seems to have been tolerated as the town eccentric, alarming in habits (daily visits to photograph at the local pool) and appearance (an unkempt beard and ratty sweater) but harmless enough. In one memorable shot two seated girls confront the camera with disdain, as if to say, "There's that creepy old guy again."

As Mr. Buxbaum's film reveals, some of Mr. Tichy's subjects assumed that his camera was fake. The cameras certainly don't look functional; he fashioned them from shoeboxes, toilet-paper rolls and plexiglass, polishing the lenses with toothpaste and cigarette ash. You can see some of these misbegotten objects in two vitrines, along with stacks of tattered prints.

The photographs' condition can be troubling: it suggests not just carelessness, but mental decay and even the degradation and defilement of women. Mr. Tichy is known to have encouraged visitors to drop his prints on the floor and step on them.

Yet he also adorned many of them with elaborate hand-drawn frames, a devotional touch that evokes cartes de visites and other early, personal forms of photography. The wiggly lines around one shot of a bare-chested woman make her look like Edvard Munch's "Madonna." Sometimes he also drew directly on the prints, reinforcing the figure's contours with faint pencil lines.

Elsewhere Mr. Tichy pursued streamlined, modern compositions, as when he photographed groups of bathers at Kyjov's pub-



ROMAN BUXBAUM

lic pool, playing up the graphic shapes of the swimsuits and the park's gridded white fence.

To a viewer schooled in contemporary art Mr. Tichy's prints look like Mr. Richter's early black-and-white photo-paintings translated back into the medium of photography. In "Tarzan Retired," Mr. Szeemann points to a Tichy print and chuckles, "This is a good 'Richter.'"

Mr. Tichy certainly has much in common with Mr. Richter: a background in Socialist Realism, a compulsion to archive and a determination to thwart photography's material limits. But Mr. Tichy's private archive of Eastern Bloc beauties also recalls the all-American women Mr. Prince appropriated from magazines

and publicity shots.

Mr. Prince wrote an essay for the catalog. In his signature smart-alecky, red-blooded-male persona, he links Mr. Tichy to Bettie Page, Swanson's TV dinners and the short stories of John Cheever.

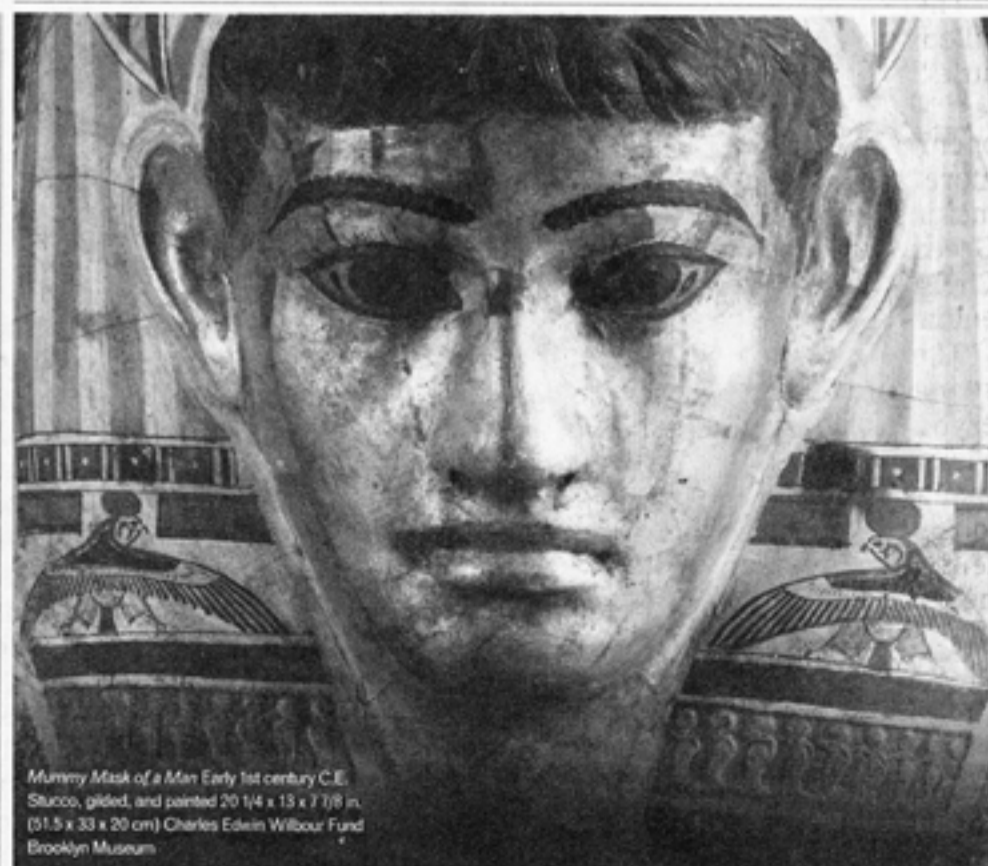
In Mr. Wallis's descriptions Mr. Tichy is a Baudelairean flâneur who thrives on chance encounters in the city, and an anti-modernist who reverses centuries of photographic progress. This portrayal sanitizes Mr. Tichy, who can come across initially as a lecherous old coot.

There's truth in all of these interpretations, but no single one quite captures the photographs' uncanny fusion of eroticism, paranoia and deliberation.



TICHY OCEAN FOUNDATION

Mr. Tichy's subjects were often unaware he was watching them.



Mummy Mask of a Man Early 1st century C.E.
Stucco, gilded, and painted 20 1/4 x 13 x 7 1/8 in.
(51.5 x 33 x 20 cm) Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund
Brooklyn Museum

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ART AND THE AFTERLIFE

"Miroslav Tichy" continues through May 9 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0000, icp.org.