

Je toto lokální, nebo národní zvyk?

An Exhibition by Peter Fitzpatrick

The Czech Republic capital, Prague – though not apparent in these images – is the impetus and backdrop for Peter Fitzpatrick's exhibition, 'Je toto lokální, nebo národní zvyk?'. Reinventing himself as the key protagonist in each of these large-scale photographs and videos, Fitzpatrick creates what on the surface appear to be surreal, Kafkaesque narratives that are in fact faithful recreations of actual encounters with characters on the streets of Prague.

For more than a decade Fitzpatrick has been fascinated by Eastern Europe and has returned whenever possible to explore a culture that is intrinsically different to his own; one that has suffered and survived, albeit with immeasurable consequences, the ravages of social upheaval. This current body of work springs from a residency undertaken at 'The Meet Factory', a new initiative for cultural exchange in Prague, in the months spanning November 2007 to April 2008. Regardless of the harsh winter and cold realities that he encountered during his stay Fitzpatrick reveled in the liminality of travel. Divorced from quotidian responsibilities and immersed in another culture afforded a unique opportunity to cast a critical eye on the spectacle and peculiarities of life in his Czech neighbourhood.

Reminiscent of the diverse practices of Paul Strand and Tuen Hocks, Fitzpatrick's work has often switched between the traditions of street photography and those of the artfully staged. Yet Prague, so complexly layered with history, politics and humanity demanded something more. In 'Je toto lokální, nebo národní zvyk?' he cleverly integrates these two different approaches to image making. Like Benjamin's flâneur wandering the urban and industrialised streets, Fitzpatrick became a voyeur of the comic tragedies enacted by the city's social misfits. Conscious of scrutinising the idiosyncrasies of the unhinged, the dispossessed and those who don't conform to the expectations of society, he collected visions of his bizarre daily encounters not with his camera – strangely disrupting Sontag's notion that 'the photographer is an armed version' of the flâneur – but through quick sketches and mental notes. When alone and back in his studio, unhindered by a return gaze, Fitzpatrick recreated those characters and situations and translated them onto film.

Relying on his inventiveness and resourcefulness, Fitzpatrick imaginatively populated the blank canvas of his Prague studio. With little more than an army surplus camouflage uniform (an eerie reminder of military regimes) and a deranged expression, or a pair of luminous overalls and a disturbing gaze he conjures an austere world characterised by the ridiculous. Curiously constructed for the camera with a few rudimentary props, a playful sprinkling of references to art and photography history, and a cable release clamped firmly underfoot, his subjects are caught mid-action, frozen in the lamplights, trapped in some private and eccentric world. They appear shadowed by ghosts or madness and evoke both humour and pathos.

The intention of these images hovers in their equivocation. The tension laying somewhere in the moment between perceiving them as humorous fiction and the comprehension that they are indeed extraordinary vignettes predicated on real events. Loosely concealed amongst the wry wit these images are imbued with the experience of displacement that Fitzpatrick is confronted with not merely as a traveller but also, and more poignantly in the people he observes. While these images are at once absurd and beguiling, they are ultimately confronting depictions of the marginalised in society. Real, remembered, distorted or imagined, Fitzpatrick excels at this type of story telling where the ambiguity is palpable and unnerving. It is the essential delight of his work.

Dr Jo-Anne Duggan, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Victoria University, in Melbourne.

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Tiedemann ed., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin trans., Rolf Cambridge, London: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 416.
2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Penguin, 1977, p. 55.



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