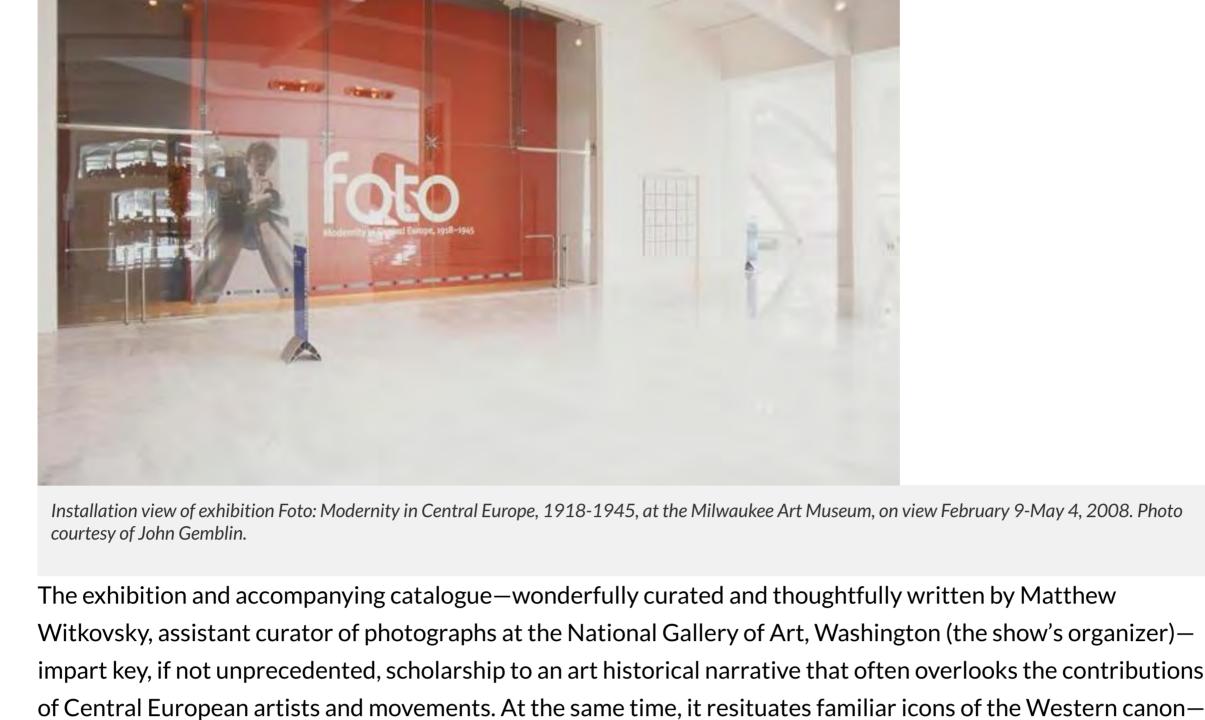
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Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945 BY SUSAN SNODGRASS · PUBLISHED 04/29/2008

FOTO: MODERNITY IN CENTRAL EUROPE, 1918-1945, MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM, FEBRUARY 9-MAY 4, 2008.

The importance of Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945 extends beyond mere historical documentation.

Fundamental to the exhibition's premise is the essential role of photography in defining modernism within this region, both in art and in the culture as a whole.



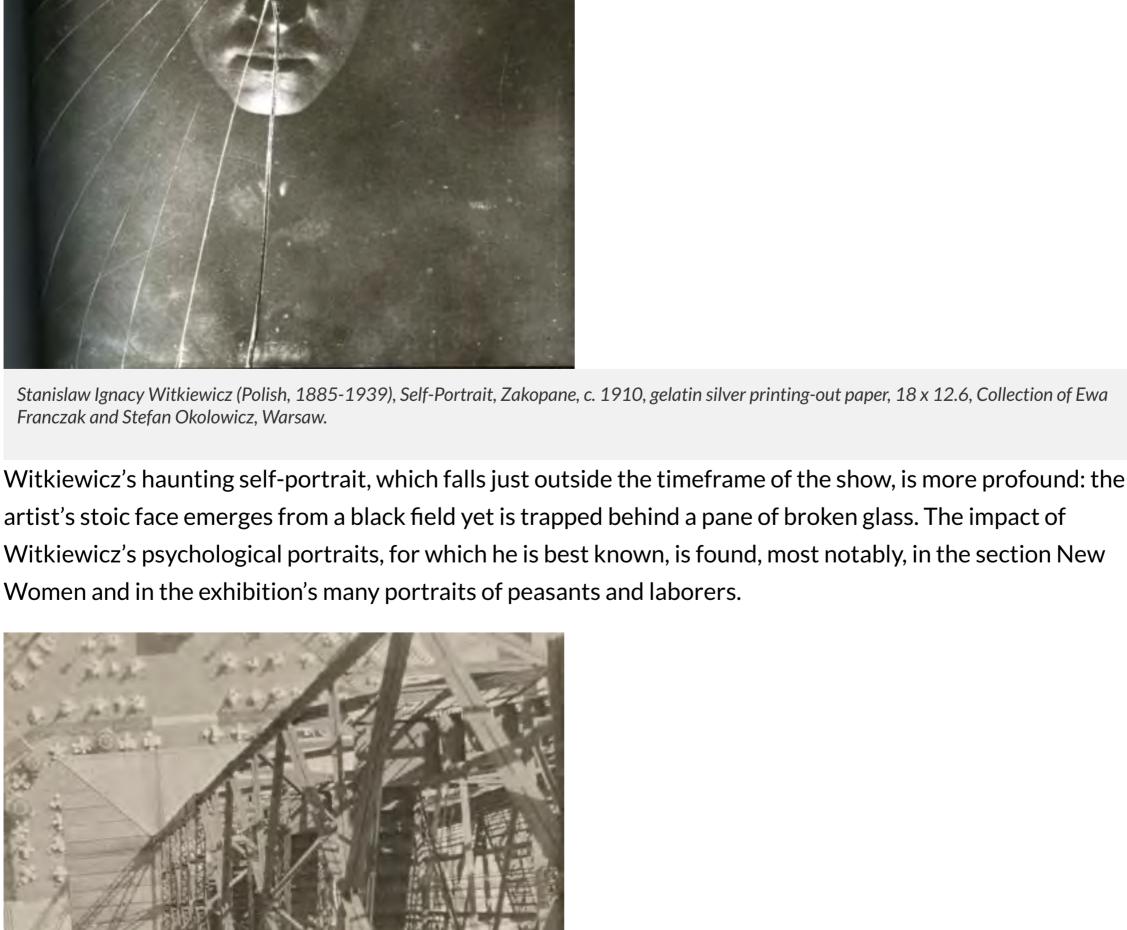
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, John Heartfield, Hannah Hoch, Hans Bellmer, August Sander, whose biographical roots are Central European—within a geo-political context that forged its own version of modernism. Seminal figures such as El Lissitzky of the Soviet Union, whose activities and sphere of influence touched ground in this region, are also

included. On view are 165 original artworks, including books and illustrated magazines, by almost 100 individual artists. Central Europe is defined here as Germany, Austria, former Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, essentially nation-states that emerged after decades as territories of empires. Captured throughout the exhibition is the dual sense of hope and despair that infused these countries during the interwar period, as is the political and social upheaval that spawned artists to craft a new vision for Europe. At the center of this new vision was photography, modern in both form and content with its ability to create "pictures of expressly modern subjects and expressly modern kinds of pictures."(1) However, the terms of modernism played out differently in Central Europe than they did in the United States and

in Western Europe. As Peter Demetz argues in his introductory essay to the catalogue, the strict division between academic photographers and amateur photographers, between modern art practices and the mass media that was characteristic of Western modernism did not exist or, at least, not to the same extent; nor did the antagonistic relationship between avant-garde artists and bourgeois society, as economic modernism "developed in a notably restricted climate" and alongside cultural modernism. (2) Lastly, the fact that photography received institutional sanction and both state and popular support suggests that artists played central roles in staking a modernist identity for the region, one often intrinsically tied to nationalism.

subthemes that survey the medium's experimental tendencies, particularly photomontage, alongside various ethnographic studies. Likewise, images of war's devastation are positioned in tandem with utopic visions of industry and Central Europe's reconstruction. Other themes examine various aspects of identity, from nationhood to the changing role of women to workers' rights. Each section flows organically to the next within the exhibition's handsome, spacious design, the aesthetic of which remains faithful to its historical subject. The exhibition is prefaced by two images: a c. 1910 self-portrait by Polish visionary Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz and an abstract still life by Czech artist Frantisek Dritkol from 1925. Dritkol's quasi-constructivist image of bold geometric shapes marks his shift from portrait photography to staged arrangements inspired by set designs from dance and theater.

The unique, highly eclectic nature of Central European photography is explored within the exhibition across eight



Moholy-Nagy Artist Rights Society (ARS); New York/VG-Bild Kunst, Bonn.

postcard photographs, and simple bold graphics.

prop.

László Moholy-Nagy; Radio Tower Berlin (1928). Gelatin silver print; National Gallery of Art; Washington. Patrons` Permanent Fund © 2007 László

modern artist, as do important artist-theorists Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Karel Teige, whose imprints reverberate

Witkiewicz, who was also an influential writer, painter, playwright, and theorist, embodies the ethos of the

throughout the show. Their works are introduced in the exhibition's first section "The Cut-and-Paste World:

Recovering from War" devoted to the origins of photomontage, first used by the Berlin Dadaists as a form agit-

Moholy-Nagy's Militarism (1924), juxtaposing a field of corpses before a fleet of army tanks with African figures

collective Devetsil, defined photomontage as "poeticism" or "picture-poems," a term also used by the Polish group

One discovers in "Laboratories and Classrooms" just how widespread the teaching of photography was in Central

championed by Moholy-Nagy in his seminal book Painting, Photography, Film (1925) were also taught at schools in

Lviv, Prague, and Bratislava. Of special note is the work of Czech Jaromir Funke, whose abstract studies resemble

photograms with their striking contrasts of black and white, although they are taken with the camera itself. Also

of interest are the technical experiments of Witold Romer, a Polish photographer, chemist, and central figure of

Blok. Teige's more spare compositions, created primarily as covers for books and magazines, meld bits of text,

and images from sports, still remains powerfully political. Teige, founder and spokesperson for the Prague

Europe. The experimental camerawork and innovative darkroom techniques taught at the Bauhaus and

Polish pictorialism. In his Portrait of My Brother (1934), one sees an almost three-dimensional rendering of his brother's face, achieved by Romer's izohelia method, which (according to didactic information) "reproduce[s] lights and darks as a series of topographical contours." Rohmer's physiognomic portrait contrasts with the many faces found in "New Women-New Men," devoted to the new, more varied roles assumed by women after World War I. According to the catalogue, women filled important positions in the workforce while gaining prominence in social and cultural arenas. They also made

significant contributions to the field of photography, particularly commercial photography, practicing most

and sometimes androgynous beings, as opposed to those by their male contemporaries, for example, Hans

Bellmer and Frantisek Dritkol also included here, where women remain subjects of sexual fantasy.

prominently in Germany, Austria and Hungary. Thus, we see women (Eva Besnyo, Lucia Moholy, Ringl and Pit,

Trude Fleischmann, Lotte Jacobi, Yva or Else Neulander-Simon) as producers of images, using the camera as an

"instrument of self-determination." (3) Their many portraits depict women as confident, independent, fashionable,

The exhibition's central thesis, which focuses upon the shared trajectories of Central European modernism and photography, reaches its apex in the largest section "Modern Living." Here one finds pictures of sports and leisure, neon signs and shop windows, and the construction of factories, housing projects, and bridges. Many of the region's great architectural achievements are captured in several works by Czech and Hungarian photographers whose modern compositions, with their layered imagery, bold geometry and off-kilter framing, echo the rhythm of their urban subjects. Works by Poles Witold Romer and Antoni Wieczorek and Slovaks Sergej Protopopov and Milos Dohnany offer an alternate view of modernism, one that still embraces rural subjects and hand labor, a theme developed further elsewhere. This section is supplemented with several examples of book

and magazine covers (many photomontages and photolithographs) that illustrate the fluid relationship that

existed between modern art, amateur clubs, photojournalism, and the popular press.

OIERTE FRAU

Mieczyslaw Choynowski; Polish; 1909-2001 America; 1932; photomontage (printed matter); National Museum in Warsawz.

Zdenek Rossmann, Cover for Civilisovaná Zena/Die Civilisierte Frau (Brno: Jan Vanek) (1929-1930). Photolithograph of a photomontage; image



photographs in the show.

Vladimír Hnízdo; Czech, 1906-1983; Hands which Cannot Close into a Fist Because of Calluses, from the series Sand Shovelers (1936). Gelatin silver

Kata Kálmán; Hungarian; Erno Weisz, Factory Worker (1932). Printed before 1955; gelatin silver print; National Gallery of Art; Washington; Patrons` Permanent Fund. In the related "Land without a Name" are several examples of Homeland Photography, rural landscapes and ethnographic portraits intended to instill a sense of patriotism and national pride. These romanticized agrarian subjects were created in reaction to modernist scenes of urbanity and industrialization, yet recognized and exploited the aesthetic potential of the photographic medium. Although unified in its content and aim, there existed within Homeland Photography various regional responses, from Polish pictorialism (Jan Bulhak, Edward Hartwig, Kazimierz Lelewicz, Antoni Wieczorek) to the Hungarian Style (Andre Kertesz, Rudolf Balogh, Gyula Pap). Rudolf Koppitz's heroic depictions of farmers and Wilhelm Angerer's sweeping landscapes are typical of the Austrian penchant for monumental symbolism. The exhibition ends where it begins, with

photomontage. The

Heartfield's Twenty

Wieland Herzfelde, a

created for the cover

of his popular journal

AIZ. This recast of an

earlier 1924

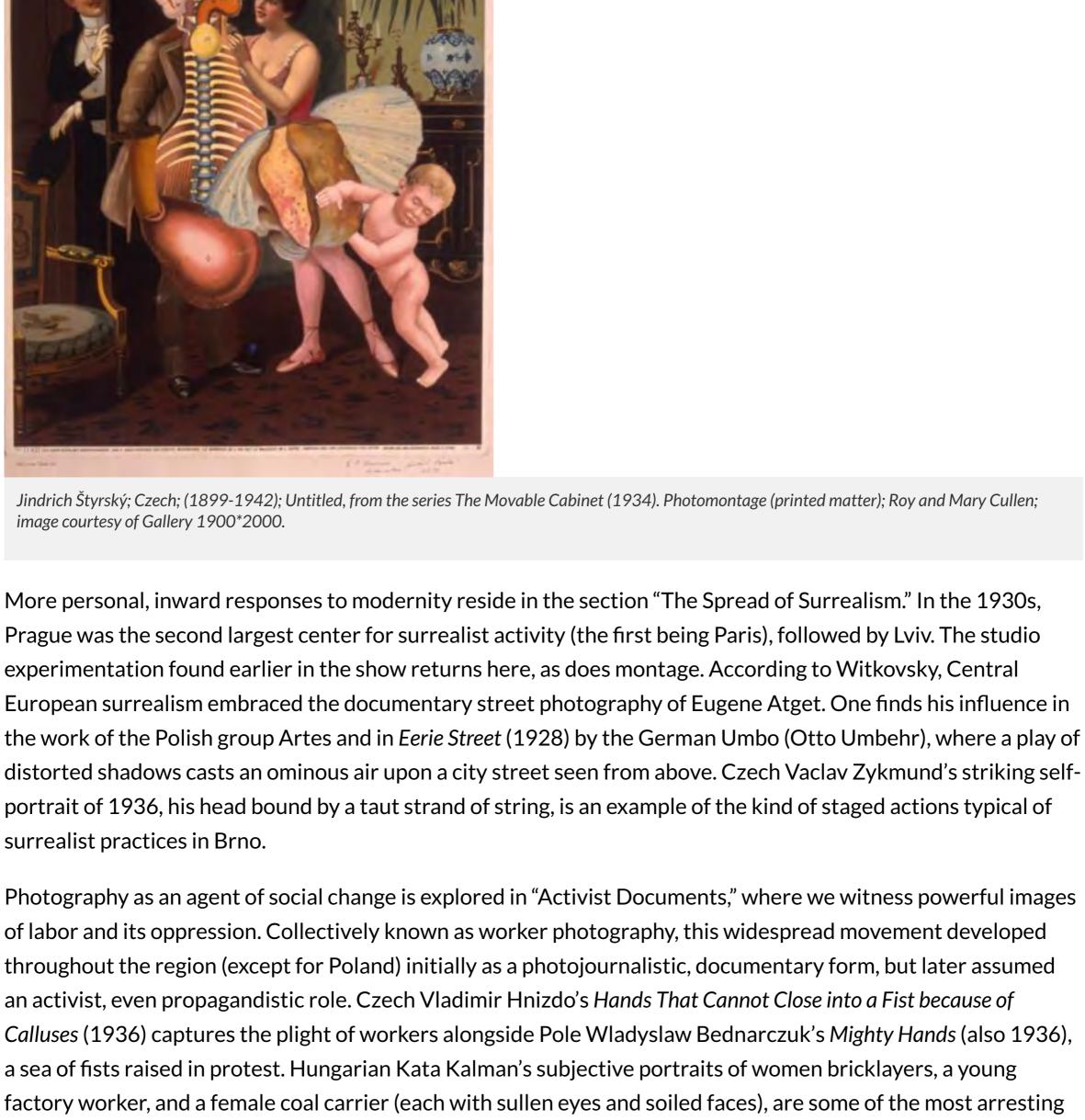
photolithograph

return of war is

marked by John

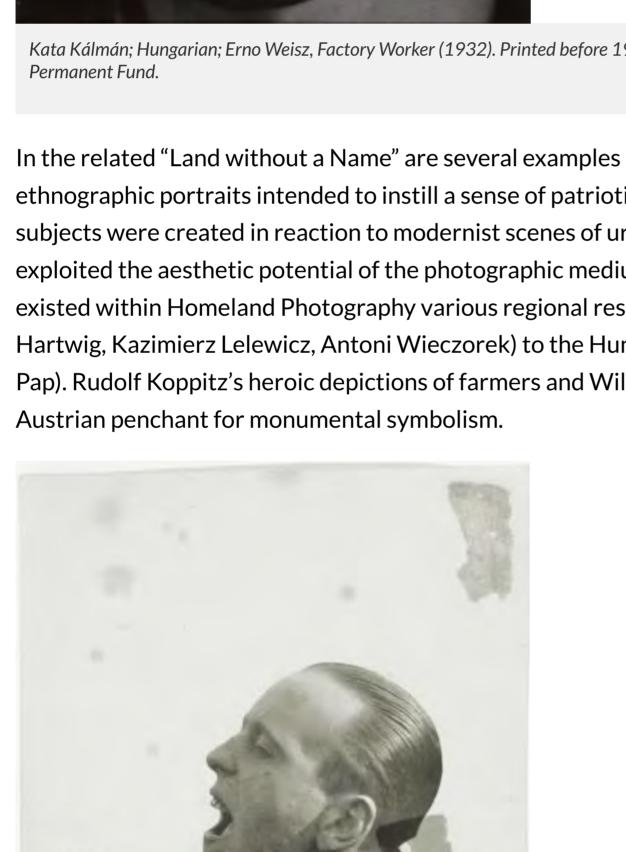
Years Later! In

1934



print; private collection, Prague.

courtesy June and Bob Leibowits.



photomontage layers a German general against a line-up of skeletons and a parade of young boys costumed in military garb, suggesting the John Heartfield; German; 1891-1968; Self-Portrait (1920). Gelatin silver print; private collection; courtesy of Ars Libri Ltd. cyclical nature of war and its impact on generations to come. Two works from Polish artist Wladyslaw Strzeminski's series To My Friends the Jews juxtapose elements of unist abstraction with photographic images from concentration camps. Compelling works by German Marianne Brandt and Hungarian Lajos Vajda pit the promise of peace against an apocalyptic future.

Accompanying Foto is an extensive film program that explores the interrelationship between photography and

screening room within the exhibition. Hans Richter's Ghosts before Breakfast (1927/1928) is a surrealist

experiment with stop-action techniques, while works by Moholy-Nagy, Eugeniusz Cekalski, and Shaul and

Yitzhak Goskind function as ethnographic documentaries. Foto offers a fascinating and varied portrait of

modernism in interwar Central Europe. It is also an intellectual achievement for which the show's organizers

film, between modernity and tradition, in Central Europe during this same time. Four films were shown in a small

should be highly commended. Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945 was organized by the National of Art, Washington. It was also on view at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and travels to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art,



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1. Matthew S. Witkovsky, Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945 (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007), p. 91 [back]

FOOTNOTES

2. Peter Demetz, Ibid., p. 12. [back]

3. Witkovsky, Ibid., p. 71. [back]

Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her blog, In/Site: Reflections on the Art of Place, which explores art, architecture and urbanism, and a finalist for the 2019 Dorthea and Leo Rabkin Foundation Arts Journalist Award. She has written for both print and online publications for over 30 years, most notably for Art in America for which she was a Corresponding Editor, as well as Textile: Cloth and Culture and THE SEEN. Her book Inside the Matrix: The Radical Designs of Ken Isaacs was published by Half Letter Press in 2019.

contemporary art in former Eastern Europe. She is a 2018 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol