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Jindrich Heisler: A Crystal in the Night

February 21 – April 4, 1998

Ubu Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of photomontages and “manipulated” photographs created by the Jewish poet, artist and Surrealist, **Jindrich Heisler**, during World War II. Working clandestinely in the bathroom of the artist Toyen (Marie Cerminová), where he was hidden during the entirety of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, he created a highly personal body of photographic work which to date has been largely unrecognized outside of France and his native country. Over thirty of these exceedingly rare vintage images, many also hand colored by the artist, will be on display from February 21st through April 4th.

Heisler (1914–1953) joined the Czech Surrealist group in 1938 just at the moment of dissension when, among other things, the poet and prominent literary figure Vitezlav Nezval suddenly converted to Stalinism. Heisler soon became friends with the luminary avant-garde artists Jindrich Styrsky (1899–1942)—the subject of two previous solo exhibitions at Ubu Gallery—and Toyen (1902–1980), who along with other Surrealists, regrouped around the theoretician and artist, Karel Tiege. (Styrsky, Toyen and Heisler were the subject of a joint retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1982.)

In 1939, the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia and imposed censorship. Heisler’s first collection of poems, *Only the Kestrels Piss Calmly on the Ten Commandments*, with illustrations by Toyen, inaugurated the series of underground publications to which Surrealist activity was confined during the remainder of the War. Sought as a Jew by the German police, Heisler hid in Toyen’s bathroom during the entirety of the War, thus being spared internment in the camps. As part of the exhibition, Ubu Gallery will display some of Heisler’s personal ephemera, including his falsely obtained German identity papers naming him “Karel Dvorak” and documenting his “Aryan” features.

Heisler contributed to a number of other clandestinely-realized Surrealist publications during the War, including the verses of *On the Needles of These Days*, an anti-war, anti-Nazi poem accompanied by a series of Styrsky’s vernacular Surrealist photographs which had been made in 1934 and 1935. Styrsky’s photographs for this book were the subjects of Ubu Gallery’s inaugural exhibition in 1994.

Working covertly during 1943 and 1944, Heisler realized a series of photomontages, as well as his unique “photo-graphiques,” printed from negatives, which he created by “stretching glue” on a glass substrate. Over thirty of these rare photographs are shown in the current exhibition at Ubu Gallery.

In 1947, Heisler accompanied Toyen to Paris where they became closely associated with André Breton and participated in all the activities of the Surrealist group in Paris, including the landmark International Exhibition of Surrealism at Galerie Maeght. From 1948 to 1950, he was one of the principal participants in the Surrealist review *Neon*, for which he designed the innovative layout. Having persevered through years of hardship and repression, Heisler died suddenly in Paris in early 1953 at the young age of 39.