



Time for a riot: how the art of 1968 caught a world in turmoil

It was the year hippy idealism gave way to riot and struggle – with protests in Paris, tanks in Prague and black power in the US. Guardian writers pick the pivotal works from that tumultuous time

Mon 30 Apr 2018

Photography: ‘The moment a country lost its sense of self’

On 19 August 1968, Josef Koudelka returned to Czechoslovakia from Romania, where he had been living among and photographing Romany Gypsies. The following day, Soviet tanks appeared on the streets of Prague. For seven days, the 30-year-old Moravian-born photographer roamed the city with his East German Exakta Varex camera loaded with movie film, the only stock he could find at short notice.

The resulting images, some of which were smuggled out of the country, but many of which were not seen until decades later, captured the tumult of a traumatised city. They are recognised as one of the most powerful photojournalistic essays of the 20th century.

Koudelka photographed teenagers blocking the paths of Soviet tanks, old people imploring the young Soviet soldiers to return home, flag-waving youths clambering over army vehicles. He returned to his apartment only to find more film or succumb to exhaustion. His images of defiance have, in the interim, become infused with a romantic, even elegiac quality. Their atmosphere is echoed in photographs of more recent upheavals, most notably the Arab Spring protests.

“Everything is uncertain except the hand of a passerby curled into a fist – and the hands of a watch”

This image, which he titled **Hand and Wristwatch**, is of a different order: a singular moment of calm and stillness. Here, there is no movement, no noise, only the almost empty street and that anonymous arm in the foreground, stretching out into the frame. It captures not just the moment the troops entered Prague but also the eerie atmosphere of an entire city and country helplessly losing its sense of itself.

Look closely and you can see a small group of people who have left their work to gather on the pavement. In the background, those blurry vehicles may be tanks. Everything is uncertain here except the hand of a passerby, curled into a fist, and the hands of the watch that signal the moment when everything changed utterly for the citizens of the invaded city. This may be Koudelka’s only conceptual photograph, but it resonates as an iconic image of a tumultuous political moment in which there is no tumult – only an eerie silence in which time itself seems to have come to a halt. Sean O’Hagan