

Jan Svoboda / Stanislav Kolíbal

An Attempt at an Ideal Proportion

curated by Lisa Martin and Pavel Vančát

the women's darkroom + gallery

36 Waverly Ave. #403, Brooklyn, NY 11205

Opening: Sept 13th, 2025, 6-8 pm / Closing: Dec 13th, 2025

Open by appointment through Lisa@thewomensdarkroom.com

The Women's Darkroom + Gallery is proud to present Jan Svoboda and Stanislav Kolíbal: *An Attempt at an Ideal Proportion*, the first NY show of renowned photographer Jan Svoboda, born in 1934 in Bohuňovice, Czechoslovakia, who died in Prague in 1990, and Stanislav Kolíbal, sculptor, born in 1925 in Orlová, Czechoslovakia, and at the age of 99 still resides in Prague. The exhibition presents Svoboda's own art photography in a set of exclusive contemporary prints, produced by Svit Gallery in Prague. On loan from the archive of Stanislav Kolíbal, we are proudly presenting a rare selection of Svoboda's original photographs for Kolíbal and even one of his legendary sculptures: *Little Frame* from 1969.

Jan Svoboda's unique perspective on the use of photography, specifically as a tool to "express the most intimate problems and thoughts as the result of self-reflection, a response to outer but primarily inner impulses" (Petr Balajka, 1991), are not unlike his desire to write poetry when he was young. His unorthodox attitude to photography derived from **Josef Sudek's legacy** and from meditations on pictorial *valeurs* (inspired by **Paul Cézanne**) and canons of painting. It shifted **toward minimalism and conceptual art during 1960s and 1970s and managed to connect his photography with contemporary Czech artists**. Between 1968 and 1975, Jan Svoboda documented Stanislav Kolíbal's often ephemeral sculptures, which evolved into a fascinating dialogue between two distinct artistic disciplines through their silently shared meditations on space, light and temporality.

The collaboration of Svoboda and Kolíbal took place between 1968 and 1975: **Kolíbal installed Svoboda's first solo exhibition in 1968**, with unusual theatrical hanging and with the floor covered with autumn leaves, marking the heavy atmosphere just after the Russian invasion. In the opposite direction, for Svoboda, documenting Kolíbal's work was far from routine; it was an inspiring dialogue that allowed him to explore creative potential within photography. Svoboda's unique understanding of light, shadow, and composition enabled him to emphasize the inherent tensions and delicate balance within Kolíbal's geometric and minimalist pieces. He frequently captured Kolíbal's autonomous objects in soft daylight within the studio or an inner courtyard, carefully choosing specific locations and constructing the space and composition for each individual work. It often involved incorporating elements of the surrounding environment, such as crumbling walls, power sockets, dirt on the wall, or parquet floor grids, which deformed the illusion of space, enhancing the photographic image itself, sometimes even at the expense of documentary readability. This radical approach has often blurred the lines between two-dimensional representation and three-dimensional reality. Svoboda even paid an explicit tribute to Kolíbal in incorporating Kolíbal's "Little Frame" into his own photographic composition and one year later he dedicated him his "Photograph for Stanislav Kolíbal". Their shared approach to minimalism and conceptual art allowed Svoboda to re-interpret and re-contextualize Kolíbal's art, creating images that stood as artworks in their own right.

Written by Pavel Vančát (in collaboration with Lisa Martin)



Jan Svoboda, *Untitled*, Stanislav Kolíbal's *Little Frame* in Svoboda's flat, Prague, 1970.



Jan Svoboda's first exhibition, installed by Stanislav Kolíbal, Galerie na Karlově náměstí, Prague 1968



Jan Svoboda, Found Still-Life, Self-portrait 1983

Jan Svoboda (1934-1990) was a pivotal figure in Czech photography, respected for his minimalist and conceptually rich approach. His artistic journey began with illustrating his own poetry through photographs in late 1950s, inspired by his beloved Josef Sudek.

During the 1960s his work tended toward a special fusion combining

symbolism and minimalism. By the end of the decade he began to work with appropriation and self-referring images. Svoboda produced his images in unusual sizes, aspiring to elevate them to the realm of visual arts to relate to his artistic friends. His last retrospective exhibition was held at The Photographers' Gallery in London in 2020.

Stanislav Kolíbal (born 1925) is a renowned Czech sculptor and artist, primarily known for his geometric abstraction and conceptual works that explore spatial relationships, tension, and balance. Kolíbal's art often deals with fundamental forms and the interplay of light and shadow, frequently utilizing simple materials like white plaster to eliminate superfluous visual qualities and effects. His works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, as described by Kolíbal himself, became increasingly metaphorical, focusing on "the process of happening" rather than a finished state, existing "somewhere in the middle," "at a particular moment". Among numerous other exhibitions home and abroad, Kolíbal represented Czech Republic at the Venice Biennale in 2019.



Jan Svoboda: Photograph for Stanislav Kolíbal, 1971.

Stanislav Kolíbal's work is represented in the collections of: Museum of Modern Art, New York (US), Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York (US), National Gallery of Art, Washington (US), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (FR), FRAC Bretagne (FR), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (US), Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Winterthur (CH), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (US), Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris (FR), Tate Gallery, London (UK), Kampa Museum, Prague (CZ), National Gallery, Prague (CZ), Albertina, Wien (AT) and many others...

Jan Svoboda's works are in the collections of: Centre Pompidou, Paris (FR), The Moravian Gallery in Brno (CZ), Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague (CZ), Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (GB), National Gallery, Prague (CZ), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (FR), Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź (PL), Museo universitario de ciencias y arte, México City, Muzeum narodowe, Wrocław (PL) and others...

Pavel Vančát is Czech curator and writer, specializing in photography and contemporary art. He studied at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague. He has curated numerous monographic exhibitions, including **Pavel Jasanský** at Prague City Gallery (2025), **Jan Svoboda: Against the Light** at Photographers' Gallery in London (2000, with Clare Grafík), **Andreas Müller-Pohle: Coincidences** at Prague City Gallery (2014) or **Miroslav Tichý** at the House of Arts in Brno (2007, with Jana Vránová). In 2011 he curated the overview **Mutating Medium. Photography in Czech Art 1990–2010** for Rudolfinum Gallery in Prague. He was the head curator of Fotograf Festival in Prague in 2019, including its central exhibition **Images of the Ends of History: Czech visual culture 1985-1995**. Except for dozens of exhibition catalogues and monographs he has prepared two books on Jan Svoboda in 2011 (FotoTorst) and 2015 (Moravian Gallery, with Jiří Pátek) and is currently working on his catalogue raisonné.

With thanks to: Jan Svoboda's Estate / Nadace Stanislava Kolíbala / SVIT Gallery, Prague / Czech Center NY