

*Responses • Kafka's Prague*, Jiří Kolář (Twisted Spoon Press)

I bought this book because of the sequence which forms the second part – 'crumplages' of photographs, accompanied by quotes from Kafka – having discovered Kolář's name online in relation to myriad forms of collage. These often gave names to ways of cutting, folding, juxtapositioning or distorting images I and many others already use in visual arts. *Kafka's Prague* is an entertaining and thought-provoking sequence, with deconstructed and re-imagined buildings, reproduced in full colour, opposite brief and elusive fragments from Kafka, often to do with death, dreams and confusion. But it is *Responses* that has enthralled me.

Kolář drew on Surrealism and Dada in his writing and visual art, although he later moved beyond and away from these influences, and much of his art he considered visual poetry. In response to the Czech regime he lived under he made silent, visual poems, but even these mute texts had to be published in samizdat form to avoid punishment by the Communist rulers. By the early 1970s he was in exile, and *Responses*, a gathering of 71 sections of notes and reflection (he sometimes referred to it as an interview without questions) was completed in Paris. It would not be published until 1984, in Germany, and only now has it been translated into English.

It's a fascinating statement of poetics, and as such is a product of its time and place rather than a manifesto or definitive statement, a fact the 'Translator's Note' makes clear. It contains some grand statements about Art, as well as personal recollections, memories and asides. It discusses specific ways to write and collage, ponders the idea of fate, authenticity, poetic form, and how to find out about the world:

I said before I didn't feel as if tearing, crumpling, and cutting reproductions and texts were acts of destruction. It felt more like a kind of interrogation, as though I were constantly querying something, or something were querying me. I asked myself: What was beyond the page, the letters, the picture, inside of it all? I knew something had to be there. (page 38)

This inquisitiveness underpins the whole of *Responses*, and is something I feel akin to, something I ask my students to be. Kolář is sometimes wilfully awkward: he won't work with established forms; he dismisses his previous work; he perhaps clings to, and defends, what we might regard as outdated ideas of the avant-garde:

It would seem that experimentation and daring in art presents more than a danger to wrongheaded people that anything else. Start to think for yourself and you are more dangerous than anything that can be made. The truth is, all the power of art and literature largely comes from its ability to produce a shift to a new field of perception. (page 14)

I find these declamatory statements, which emerge from many quieter passages, provocative and thought-provoking, but Kolář is also aware the writer/artist has to contemplate and understand things for themselves, before they can create. 'It's imperative to appreciate poetry's historical development', he says, but goes on to suggest that '[e]very attempt at change and revolution came out of something'. (page 18) He also states that writers must 'learn from those who are expanding it [the field of perception] towards other disciplines, whether in art, science, philosophy, or other fields.' (page 15)

Kolář, however, had always been drawn 'to locate the points of friction between visual art and literature' (page 12), and suggests that '[t]he material itself gives you a chance to think differently'. (page 22) 'For the poet, language is a type of understanding as well as misunderstanding' (page 24), seems to me a powerful statement for those of us who struggle to navigate, filter and make sense of the 21st century world of (dis) information overload. 'Form or content becomes trivial when we fail to notice the hidden meaning' states Kolář (page 51). *Responses* is rooted in a different version of the world to ours, but it reveals a restless, creative, thoughtful artist/writer at work, whose ideas can still challenge and provoke.

I think every artist one day must, like it or not, try to effect what's called a revolution: a reshaping and reinvention of poetry as a whole [...] (page 17

Rupert Loydell