

01

Alise Tifentāle

#dailyphotography and #fail

The time has come when a “bad” photograph is “good”, i.e., what was once considered a failure on the photographer’s part now plays a useful role in the discourse on photography and the understanding and criticism of photographic media.

As an art historian, my daily photographic practice involves documenting a variety of visual and textual materials, primarily on a smartphone—including museum and gallery exhibits, library and archive visits, articles and book pages, and visually captivating architecture and design. Often, the artwork and design objects found in museums are difficult to photograph with a smartphone without the device and its holder showing up in the frame. If I can be seen where only the artwork should be, I have failed to take a good photograph of the artwork, because “good” requires for the camera and the photographer to remain invisible. In terms of visual culture studies, however, these failures reveal a significant—albeit often fleeting—interaction between a work of art and its viewer. Over time, these moments have become important points of reference in my daily photographic practice as well as on my Instagram account @alise_tifentale.

Instagram became my primary social media platform in 2013 when I started working at the Cultural Analytics Lab at City University of New York, and the head of the laboratory, digital culture and media theorist Lev Manovich, came up with an idea for a large-scale research project exploring selfies, a phenomenon that had just found its way into the public spotlight. We decided to focus on selfies posted on Instagram since it was the leading visually centered social media platform at the time. The research resulted in the well-known project Selfiecity.net (2014-2015) along with a series of scientific articles and book chapters that I wrote about selfies and photography on social media over the next five to six years. Since the project, Instagram has become more than an object of research for me—it is also an important tool both for work and self-reflection.

Documentaries such as *The Great Hack* (2019) and *The Social Dilemma* (2020) threaten us with civil war and world-wide economic and political catastrophes as a consequence of our use of social media, claiming that it can activate and amplify the darker side of humanity. The way I see it, however, the solution is not to ignore, ban, or stop using social media since it is pretty clear by now that it is here to stay. We demand change-oriented action from the owners of these large platforms, but as their ordinary users, we also have every opportunity to use them for positive purposes, be they creative or scientific.

1 *Santiago Calatrava, World Trade Center Transportation Hub in New York, 2016.*

2 *The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin* [Exhibition]. *Exhibit arrangement at the Jewish Museum, New York, 2017.*

3 *Julia Chier, Mothers Under Surveillance, 1993. Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today* [Exhibition], *Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2018.*

4 *I could not find the name of the artwork or the author. Shanghai Biennale, 2018.*

5 *Anish Kapoor, Non-Object (Door), 2008. Minimalism: Space, Light, Object.* [Exhibition], *National Gallery Singapore, 2018.*

6 *Sahador Dali, Jean Clemmer. An Encounter, a Work* [Exhibition], *10 Corso Cosmo gallery, New York, 2018.*

7 *Deborah Anzinger, Inhospitable, 2018. Solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2018.*

8 *Exhibition at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art, 2019.*

9 *An installation by the MO Museum in Vilnius, 2019.*

10 *Sarmīte Maliņa, Language, 1996. Alma gallery, Riga, 2020.*

03

Jānis Taurens

The Story of Zabulis

There once lived Zabulis, a dreadful creature who was feared by everyone. – “What did he look like, then, if everyone was so afraid? you will ask. – Well, it is impossible to say since no one has ever seen him – after all, he is Zabulis. I encountered him in a dream once, but it was too nightmarish to tell anyone about it, and after a while, I could no longer remember. Hence, I also cannot describe his appearance to you.

Where Zabulis lives is yet unknown – how could one imagine his house (or could it be a burrow or a cave?) without knowing anything about him? However, I know that he dwells in wet places such as ditches and holes in the ground, or sometimes just muddy puddles. – “No, I have not seen him, at least not this time of year,” you will say. – Well, you have been lucky. A single encounter and a coat covered in mud were enough of a reason for me to become wary and avoid sneaking into any place that Zabulis could inhabit.

Nevertheless, he cannot be escaped. Every now and then he visits my home, too – I dread the thought that one day he might choose to stay forever! As for the hidden belongings, however, Zabulis is not the one to blame – that is the work of dwarfs and a whole different story for another time. Listen, once it happened to me so... Oh, but I better keep quiet about that, or you will never want to hear his name again.

‘How can you even be sure that it is Zabulis and not just some boggart?’ you will ask. – Well, the thing is that somehow he can never be mistaken for anyone else. It is for that very reason that he is called Zabulis, or maybe for another reason, I cannot seem to remember anymore.

Let me tell you about the time that we tried to catch Zabulis. Deciding on the best method of capturing him was not easy – we were unsure if it would be better to set up a trap (but what kind and where?), hunt for him in the woods, or simply go on an expedition in hopes of discovering him somewhere out and about. Or should we rather just hide and wait for him to come to us? Suddenly, the right approach came to mind – surely the best way to find Zabulis was to forget about him altogether and pay no attention to the matter. Indeed, we carried on with our lives and after a while, it almost seemed like he had disappeared.

Then we began to receive curious stories from afar. Someone had found a drawing of Zabulis in their grandfather’s library, but when they sent it to us for examination, however, it got mysteriously lost in the mail, only proving that the drawing had indeed been a depiction of Zabulis. Elsewhere, a fisherman had come across a never before seen fish in a lake, only it had been far too big to be a fish. When we managed to find the lake in question and finally met the fisherman, it turned out that all he had seen were some strange, giant circles rippling in the water, leading us to the conclusion that he had undoubtedly witnessed Zabulis. Later a skull was discovered in an archaeological excavation and immediately declared to be the head of Zabulis, but the archaeological museum (not the safest place to keep it, some argued) registered it as Neolithic pottery, and to the surprise of no one, soon after that, the exhibit was nowhere to be found.

It is only here that the story of Zabulis begins, on one late afternoon when I had a sudden suspicion that he was outside, roaming in the garden. Since it was already getting dark, I decided to leave the investigation for the morning. The garden was vast and overgrown, crowded with all sorts of different objects, so I had to determine exactly what I would be searching for. The surest way to track down something difficult to find – look for its footprints!

I looked at the dog footprints in the freshly tilled soil over by the fence – those definitely did not belong to Zabulis. I looked in the pile of last autumn’s leaves, under the reoccurring bush, and even in the sandpit. I looked at the blackbird and the yellow dandelion, and listened to birds chirping in the trees. I listened to the sound of the neighbour’s saw until it dawned on me – I had no idea how the footprints would look. Some time had passed since I began my garden quest, yet I still had to reach the fence that separated it from the house of the Bird Man. It seemed to me that all distances naturally extended to greater lengths in the early morning, when we are still sleepy. The far end of my garden was wild and unkempt, just as it should be in any proper garden. Making my way through the tall stalks of some annual plant, the name of which I still cannot recall, I stumbled upon a second garden, seemingly identical to mine. Sensing that Zabulis had just left, I immediately knew that this was his garden.

Expecting it to mirror my own garden or to be either a bigger, enlarged version of mine, or a toylike miniature, I surprisingly could not find any noticeable differences. It was a shame I had not paid more attention to the tulips growing in front of my house – counted them and taken notice of their colour –, for I could have compared them to the tulips in Zabulis garden. Still, even though it was impossible to pinpoint what exactly caused the feeling, something about this garden seemed different.

Upon entering the house, I found that all of the furniture was in place, only it was covered in a thick layer of dust. But who sweeps the dust in my house? Perhaps I had just never run my fingers across any of the dust-covered surfaces up until that point? The smell of tobacco smoke enveloped me and I turned around to see a small man sitting in the armchair and smoking a pipe. – “Zabulis! I panicked at first, but then, on second thought, he did not look like him. However, the man would probably know something about Zabulis – where he had gone and when he would return. At the very least the man could finally describe his appearance to me. But even though the man’s piercing gaze was focused on me, he seemed deeply immersed in his thoughts and I could not muster up the courage to ask him anything. Looking for a way out of the awkward situation, I decided to start a fire in the stove (the air in the room was cold and damp, although the morning, to my memory, had been warm and sunny), but when I leaned down to open the stove door, I somehow knew it would not open. Then I remembered that there had been no staircase in the hallway when I entered the house. Had I just failed to notice the stairs as it so often happens with ordinary things that we use every day? No, that could not be right – after all, this was the house of Zabulis and from the moment I stepped over its threshold, I had been careful and observant. Now I knew I had to get to the second story of the house by any means, find the bathroom and turn on the faucet – if the water ran, everything would be resolved. ‘No, that would resolve nothing!’ I hopelessly thought to myself.

I turned my head and saw that the armchair was empty even though the faint smell of tobacco still lingered in the air. ‘Of course, I had just smoked the pipe in the morning,’ I thought, ‘or did I go into the garden to look for Zabulis right after waking up?’ Having decided that there was no use thinking about it too much, I sat down on the sofa, packed my pipe with tobacco, and lit it to properly fill the room with smoke. Then I brewed myself some coffee, took the newspaper out of the mailbox, and tried to return to my daily routine. Not long after that, the other inhabitants of the house started to slowly appear one after another, and, as always, the dwarfs (like I said – that is a different story) had hidden my book and taken all of the lead out of the mechanical pencil. And yet, ever since that day, there are times when I cannot shake the feeling that it is not my home that I live in, but the home of Zabulis.

Pārdaugava, March-May, 2006

05

Helēna Demakova

Backson

Owl read Christopher Robin’s notice to Rabbit, it consisted of four sentences: “GON OUT. BACKSON. BISOY. BACKSON. C.R.” As always, Rabbit hurried off to see Pooh, whom he found making a strange noise.

NOISE, BY POOH

Oh, the butterflies are flying,
Now the winter days are dying,
And the primroses are trying
To be seen.

And the turtle-doves are cooing,
And the woods are up and doing,
For the violets are blue-ing
In the green.

Oh, the honey-bees are gumming
On their little wings, and humming
That the summer, which is coming,
Will be fun.

And the cows are almost cooing,
And the turtle-doves are mooing,
Which is why a Pooh is pooing
In the sun.

For the spring is really springing;
You can see a skylark singing,
And the blue-bells, which are ringing,
Can be heard.

And the cuckoo isn’t cooing,
But he’s cucking and he’s ooking,
And a Pooh is simply pooching
Like a bird.

May will be backson and then June, which will be followed by many other months, but only twelve altogether—the exact number of living horses that were featured in a 1969 arte povera exhibition by Jannis Kounellis.

Here—at the location that inspired Sūnu ciems (Moss village) in Andrejs Upīts’ novel Sūnu ciema zēni (The Boys of Moss Village)—May is the busiest month. In England, Winnie the Pooh can be “simply pooching” in the sun by the time May rolls around, as the weather conditions are a lot warmer and all garden work has been finished in April. Here, however, we have work to do until the very end of May—dahlia tubers to awaken from their winter sleep, shrubby cinquefoil bushes to trim, and potatoes to plant. (By the way, it was here in Skrīveri that Jānis Purapuķe wrote his story *Savs kaktiņš, savs stūrītis*: no Latvijas arāju dzīves (T.N.: it roughly translates to One’s Own Corner, One’s Own Little Patch of Land: The Story of a Latvian Ploughman) (1925)—down by the Daugava river, where the Research Institute of Agriculture is now situated.)

In a 2010 survey of a nationally representative sample carried out by research center SKDS, when asked: “How much time should one spend doing garden work?”, 36% of the population replied with “all their free time.” That is the population of Latvia, not just Skrīveri. In his 1945 novel *The Green Land*, Andrejs Upīts also referred to this most persistent of addictions when writing about Laura, the farmer’s daughter: “Has our Laura ever worked? A healthy girl, but all of her days are spent in the flower garden or lounging with an almanac in her hands.”

“The garden” is the complete opposite of any answer that students would offer to a question that Arnis Rītuks, associate professor at Art Academy of Latvia, asks in his course “Introduction to Philosophical Reflection”. The question is as follows: “What does not depend on mankind?” Everything in the garden depends on mankind. Of course, it is also affected by the weather, insects, birds, etc., but humans are the most important because, without them, there would be no garden at all. At the time, I suggested to one of the students that she answer Rītuks’ question with the late artworks of Vija Celmins—fragments of the desert, the sky, the sea, and even spider webs.

In the garden, however, there is no time to ponder such mighty and infinite concepts. Garden work grounds us and provides constant reminders that nothing is eternal. I could deceive myself into thinking that this tuja, which my grandmother planted sixty years ago, is as eternal as the changing of seasons in this exact spot in the garden captured in these photographs. But then I am reminded of the chestnut tree that bloomed so beautifully in May, next to the hawthorn. Four years ago, I had the chestnut tree cut down because it had