THE ABSENCE OF MYTH
Tereza Zelenkova

The Absence of Myth

Foreword by Daniel C. Blight
Poem by Ed Anon

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Tereza Zelenkova makes photographs that engage with a number of things, as formed and descriptive as they are oblique. This book and the exhibition that accompanies it is the manifestation of a practice that takes influence from a range of sources, including the French writer Georges Bataille, the much-lauded expounder of gloomy thought; the museum as a space for the documentation of objects out of context; and the artistic and literary traditions of surrealism - that pursuit that puts what is unconscious out in the open in all its strange, knotty ambiguity.

The reader of this book will encounter these subjects with little ease: Zelenkova quite successfully manages to load the consolidated weight of photography’s obsession with the success rate of what it documents, in to this volume of new images and both new and referenced texts. However, in accompaniment to this engaging process of thinking appears a space created for a reader or a viewer so that they might quite intuitively move through this work - finding new insights in its nooks - much like the creased scrotum of the man in Jindrich Styrsky’s 1933 surrealist photomontage *Emily Comes to Me in a Dream*.

Instead of the now well-worn cliché of a conversation on death that references Bataille, one might consider instead at least beginning with the subject of a joke. There are in fact many allusions to the act of living in Bataille: living with laughter; tolerating rupture; facing the divine and eventually the ‘incongruent void of absence’.

Bataille, the museum, photographs: all these things are complicated and further complicate one another when ushered together. There may be no recompense for a combined study of them, but that would be missing the point. A sense of profound dead-endedness was conjured in Bataille when he said, of the kind of torment that might be encountered when considering a god of something: ‘There is in divine things a transparency so great that one slips into the illuminated depths of laughter beginning with even opaque intentions.’

What we might draw from this is the things that artists hold dear - their ideas, the objects they produce and the spaces in which their work is presented - are, as the gods of their world smothered in a sense of the exorbitant, best laughed at. Bataille saw a direct correlation between laughter as it ruptures, and its relationship to knowledge. The very thing “knowledge”, which manifests in most
artistic practice, is inexplicably tied to a sense of giggling ineptness – a sense of grinning failure. Zelenkova’s image of an orange tree in Seville sets up an analogy to study this work with laughter. The fruit attracts us - its colour and form is edible and moist. However, we cannot eat its raw flesh, as it tastes acrid and harsh. Like certain kinds of orange trees in Spain, the fruit when photographed must be turned to marmalade - sweetened in order to be consumed.

As Bataille suggests with regard to laughter: ‘This object is always known, but normally from the outside.’ To get inside an orange, to know an object, requires at least a chortle. It is a false myth to imagine that without any sense of humour (or more precisely of the act of laughter) you will get to what an object is. When there is no work the work itself becomes an empty space, a space where, as Bataille put it, he ‘awaits the sleight of hand that measures me immeasurably joyful.’

Laugh with Bataille, laugh in museums and laugh at photographs, but do not laugh without realising that in doing so you become closer to what is missing: closer to your own death through a wretch, a chuckle or a cachinnation.

- Daniel C. Blight
MUSEUM. Museum is a sort of non-site outside of time. It is a place in which we attempt to accumulate, classify and categorize all of history. Devoid of their role in the outside world, the objects in the museums and public displays are reminiscent of cadavers. Their form, once subordinate to their function, becomes increasingly visible. The sole purpose of their existence now lies in their appearance - it becomes less important what the objects mean, only how they appear.
FREUD’S STUDY. Arriving at Freud’s study, which has been preserved in his former Hampstead home in London, one is not sure whether one has entered a psychoanalyst’s office, or a Victorian opium den. The oriental décor, antiquities, and Egyptian steles suggest something more than just a casual inquiry into working processes of human psyche. Freud’s study is anything but the sterile environment of a scientist. This place gleams with a decadent glamour and the walls could tell one too many stories of Freud’s patients’ most private and scandalous thoughts. In this dream like space, which seems to be so far from everyday reality, one is immediately drawn to lie down on the infamous couch veiled in Persian tapestries, and confess the darkest of secrets.

However the piece of furniture that is somewhat more captivating than the couch itself, is Freud’s slightly grotesque leather armchair. Its design is an uncannily close match with some of the primitive idols resting on Freud’s desk. Apparently the chair was specially designed by the architect Felix Augenfeld in order to allow Freud to read in his favorite and rather peculiar position - one of his legs slung over the arm of the chair, the book held high and his head unsupported. Thus this object of my curiosity is perhaps merely a utilitarian piece of furniture, designed in order to provide comfort during its owner’s reading. On the other hand, it is possible that as such this chair, being a kind of an imprint of Freud’s unique body posture, becomes almost a surrogate for Freud himself. With its bizarre, human-like form, this chair haunts the study with Freud’s eternal presence.
PARIS. Time is a currency that is calculated in past and future but it always cheats us of the present. And so, sitting at Place des Vosges surrounded by strangers, once again I’m thinking about the past of the last few days, but also the past of centuries lived in the dusty streets of Paris. The strange silence of Monday afternoon and the lack of sleep brings a feeling of slightly altered consciousness. The only thing that binds me to reality is the place, the sound of the fountains, and the endless circulation of water falling from dozens of small lion heads, only to be pumped back up in order to fall down again, and to repeat this over and over, like a cyclic poem, like history itself.

Waves of languor wash over me in regular intervals like the waves in the sea of which I’ve daydreamt so often, longing for eternity, for nothingness, for voyages to faraway lands. “Away from the big city where a man cannot be free”, Lou Reed chants into my ears, while I’m contemplating the traces of other people’s lives that litter the cobbled pavements of metropolis like cigarette butts and burnt out matches. Anew, I’m trying to understand what really matters in life and how to live it so that one day, when facing the inevitable end, one can confront it devoid of any remorse.

Like each photograph that I take, every love affair is a fleeting illusion of immortality. Yet even in those brief moments of happiness I know that no matter what life throws in my path, nothing could save me from the severe and terminal regret that all this would vanish nonetheless, swallowed up whether by death, time or distance. And so at last, when our life lacks any kind of tragedy, we feel as close to dying as ever.
longer only to see
this
will start as it should
there’s a country I cannot reach
middle of an empty, courteous ocean
but mostly rain
everybody
for going
was waiting
up the stairs
for a blue sky
a form like a picture
as if it was about to fall
to fit like a rapture
as we never see
then absence
rain
come and go I’ll have
the midnight white
an idea
that one would make
of my recollection
I will have
of the railway night
I will not be alone
it is the dead people
defend the melting
seated sounds
who think around me
where I’m from everything is virgin
before me
already, before
then purity
without objecting
the non-existent is
never would some
agreeing
brown
perfectly
eyes
to declining delights
have in a memory
my poor existence spreads
but elsewhere
a more beautiful place
to the invisible
where to open themselves
before coming face to face
shoals of neuralgic fish
with the first glimmers
fur, I'm wearing my own skin
faith
a hundred mermaids
admitted in letters
and eating my own flesh
their eyebrows raise
there is a little bit of sea in my eyes
they can see me
I'm crowning shipwrecked passers-by
who are you sir
if I enjoyed their absence
blue
that I miss in return
it is kind
I am disturbing you
middle
of a blur
other than
ocean
my most I, how I wish
longer only to see
SEA. The sea, those masses of water pushed towards me by the waves that caress the land in that endless violent act of love, always attracted me by its roughness, by the unpredictable nature of this vast nothingness that is the ocean. Eternity, it is the sea gone with the sun, Arthur Rimbaud wrote. These words, engraved in my memory resonate within me every time I find myself on the coast, during all those moments when you can’t help thinking that you could be somewhere else. Such an impossible proposition yet describing so accurately what our mind cannot comprehend. Like the sea, “poetry leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity”.¹

¹. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*
I am the dead
I am the blind
the airless shadow

like rivers in the sea
the noise and the light in me
lose themselves endlessly

I am the father
and the tomb
of the heavens

the excess of darkness
is the burst of the star
the cold of the grave is a die

deadth rolls the die
and the depths of the heavens praise
the night which falls within me.\(^3\)
LIST OF WORKS

SUR l'OCÉAN VIDE
je ne pourrai jamais que voir
ça
il y a un pays que je ne peux atteindre
dans l'océan vide, galant
mais surtout la pluie
tout le monde
d'avoir monté
attendait
le ciel bleu
une forme comme une image
comme s'il allait tomber
qui va comme une extase
comme on ne voit jamais
alors absence
la pluie
aller venir j'aurais
le blanc nuit
une idée
qu'on se fera
de mon souvenir
j'aurais
de la nuit gare
je ne serais pas seule
ce sont des gens morts
défendent les bruits
assis, fondant
qui pensent autour de moi
d'où je suis tout est vierge
avant moi
déjà, avant
après pureté
sans s'opposer
le non existant est
jamais des

parfaitement
yeux
acceptant
marrons
ces délices en déclin
n'auront dans une mémoire
ma pauvre existence sème
mais ailleurs
un plus bel endroit
à l'invisible
où s'ouvrir
avant de se trouver face d'abord
des bancs de poissons névralgiques
devant les premières lueurs
foufou, je porte ma propre peau
foi
une centaine de sirènes
en lettres admises
et mange ma propre chair
leurs sourcils se relèvent
il y a un petit peu de mer dans mes yeux
elles peuvent me voir
je couronne des passants naufragés
qui êtes-vous monsieur
si j'aimais leur absence
bleu
qui me manquent en retour
c'est presque
je vous dérange
milieu
flou
que l'autre
océan
de mes pluparts je, comme je voudrais
ne plus jamais que voir
JE SUIS LE MORT
l’aveugle
l’ombre sans air

Comme les fleuves dans la mer
en moi le bruit et la lumière
se perdent sans finir

JE SUIS LE PÈRE
et le tombeau
du ciel

L’excès de ténèbres
est l’éclat de l’étoile
le froid de la tombe est un dé

La mort joua le dé
et le fond des cieux jubile
de la nuit qui tombe en moi
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