

Momentary Snaps: Gili Tal

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The banal images used by Gili Tal, stretched onto billboards, scattered across canvases, or printed on rolling blinds, consider the role of digital and urban intervention in our daily experience. Born in Tel Aviv and working in London, Tal taps the neutral architectural elements of Western society, and the human figures that surround them, as the building blocks of workaday life. Benches and public art, handrails and handbags, fountains and those who dance in them are all leveled down into a sort of contemporary civic soup. The structural support of her practice changes freely and draws further attention toward a vital interest in the fatigued dreams of modernist metropolitan myths.

Speaking of the antibourgeois, antipainting artistic ramifications of the Russian Revolution a few years prior, in 1922 El Lissitzky declared that this socialist “New world will not need pictures. If it needs a mirror, it has the photograph.”¹ Many peers felt similarly, envisioning the industrially produced camera as the mechanical relative of an empowered working class. Artists like László Moholy-Nagy and Aleksander Rodchenko turned to photography as amateurs and captured new compositions of the everyday. Tal’s works pick up these distorted views and alternate angles in a multigenerational digestion of Moholy-Nagy’s *Eiffel Tower* series of 1925. Shot from beneath, these pictures altered the perception of a grand symbol of the modern age, showcasing beauty amid industry. The images in Tal’s *Places for Connection* (2019) are of bridges and other civic architecture, shot in the same dramatic and modern style, some exhibiting the watermarks of the stock websites they have been grabbed from. Over a century, the style has been altered little, even if the original communal meaning has. Both the Eiffel Tower and these bridges are possible symbols—Tal labels each directly with their globe-spanning titles—but in her serial reproductions, she points to a tired sameness in every city’s need for “iconic” architecture that does little to positively impact citizens’ lives.

For her 2018 solo show *Civic Virtues* at Cabinet in London, two dozen underlit roller blinds were printed with a wide-reaching cross section of daily urban plop. Bike racks, trash cans, and street signs were all nonchalantly snapped. Similar to the more *prestigious* sites of other series, these works offered atypical compositions. Whereas the modernist artist sought to advance the unexpected, Tal’s work asks whether anything can be unexpected once literally everyone in your society has access and interest in producing and consuming an endless reproduction of immediate ones and zeros. Tal’s images are hardly individual; every digital camera, every smartphone, is full of similar shots made out of passing interest. Unlike most photographic art of the past four decades, this work negates questions of authorship; rather, it reminds viewers of the increasing uselessness of the word *unique* in a digital continuity full of captured momentary snaps.

One could see Tal’s tackling of the common photo as an opposition to and a revelation of how images have changed since Piotr Uklański’s *The Joy of Photography* (1997–2007). His series reproduced the tricks in an Eastman Kodak book on the techniques of darkroom photography to purportedly add layers of meaning and irony

to the resultant cliché images of reflecting light and long-exposure waterfalls. Tal has no such wishes or denials in her work. Today there are no tricks, there are only filters, and everyone is a pro-amateur photographer. Look at the blinds: if partly rolled up, as some are, all that stares back from the promised window is a vast nothingness.

Tal herself namechecked a photography manual, *Mastering the Nikon D750*, for the title of her recent exhibition at gta Exhibitions in Zurich (2019). The show stretched similarly benign yet beautiful images across wide, freestanding billboard-like structures in both exhibition and public space throughout a university of engineering and architecture. Continuing her flaneur aesthetics, Tal created pathways with these architectural intruders picturing architectural intruders. They directed flow from rotating doors or cut off an exterior entrance, in a play on the urban detritus we hardly see in our way both physically and socially. Tal consistently tackles the invisible that guides us spatially and the visual that offers us nothing. Her recent series *Spaces for Reflection* (2019) took the idea of the *dérive* and compared it to the experience of surfing exhibitions online. Photographed on her computer screen, the works—nearly all gray, in cheap clip frames—seem to ask if the space for reflection is the endlessly similar white cube or the equally dreary laptop screen. At every turn, Tal’s work suggests that for all our advancement and creative options, we are left with a deep nothingness and a society built of small but compounding social controls. Everyone is trading freedom for cameras as the city returns to the arms of privilege, and a century after Lissitzky suggested that the photograph be our mirror, that suggestion makes a bitter kind of sense.

- 1 El Lissitzky, “The Conquest of Art,” *Ringier* 109 (1922): 32–34, trans. Michael Steinlauf, in Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky (1890–1941)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums; Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1987), 61.

39 Gili Tal, *Museums*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London

40 Gili Tal, *The Drink List*, 2017, *Gili Tal. Mastering the Nikon D750* installation view at gta Exhibitions, ETH Zurich, Höggerberg, 2019. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Nelly Rodriguez

41 Gili Tal, *Spaces for Reflection (The Whole World at Your Fingertips, Chair)*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Jenny’s, Los Angeles. Photo: Tom Carter





