

You Could Call It Normality

By: Shuka Glotman

Taken from the preface to the catalogue of the 2003 David Perlov color photographs exhibition in the Open Museum of Photography in the Tel Hai Industrial Park

Beginnings

Almost half a century separates two beginnings in David Perlov's life, which have to do with stills photography. In 1952, after his eye-opening, revelatory experience watching Jean Vigo's movie *A Zero in Behavior*, Perlov decided to dedicate himself to cinema rather than painting, on account of which he had come to Paris awhile earlier. With his senses Perlov understood that the visual aspect in cinematic endeavor was extremely vital. In his newfound enthusiasm for cinema, he sought to train himself in any way possible. In addition to finding employment at an animation studio, where he worked as a scenery-hand and janitor, he attempted to study cinema photography. As part of his training regimen, he bought himself a simple (35 mm) stills camera, an Agfa Solinette, with which he shot two rolls of film in black and white. In these rolls he intuitively sketched the territory in which he would carry out his future cinematic and stills-photography work.

He took pictures of his immediate surroundings, in a radius around the cheap hotel where he was lodged, in the poor section of the city between the Gare du Nord and the Gare de L'est. He photographed the interior of his hotel room and the view from its window; he took pictures of the train station, the street, people waiting at the bus stop, workers at the animation studio where he was employed, and close friends—a quick and sensitive impression of his Parisian world. For him, these first two rolls of film were merely a technical exercise and nothing more; he subsequently laid down his camera. He would return to stills photography only in 1961 (three years after his arrival in Israel) and has been actively engaged in it ever since.

During most of that time, he continued to shoot only in black and white, besides the photographs he produced with a Polaroid SX-70 camera (a body of work of limited extent, due to the high cost of Polaroid materials).

A second significant beginning came at the end of the year 2000, when he started to take color photographs. For years, color photography hadn't seemed worthy enough to him from an artistic aspect, because he did not find in it the necessary possibility of dissociation from reality. Fidelity to black and white seemed natural and self-evident to him. In his own words, "Color photography, which I regarded with disdain and to which I came just lately, only a few months ago, is today a great late joy to me."ⁱ His photography underwent a sudden and enthusiastic awakening, which led to a proliferation of work, rich in scope and quality.

Out of this bounty he created his latest movie, *My Stills 1952/2002*,ⁱⁱ and from it sprang his exhibition: "David Perlov: Color Photographs 2000-2003." In the past three years, Perlov has engaged in color photography only.

Working Routine

Perlov takes pictures in the immediate territory where he lives and works.

Photography will never budge him from the routine of his daily life. He does not carry a camera with him everywhere he goes. For close to thirty years, Perlov has lived in central tel-Aviv, in an apartment in one of the city's first high-rise buildings, at the corner of Shaul Ha-Melech Boulevard and Ibn-Gvirol Street, above the London Mini-Store commercial center. Perlov, an early riser, takes pictures on his way to morning coffee at the cafè beneath his home. He continues taking pictures in the commercial center during the day, when he dines there or keeps his appointments. In this space he is not an anonymous character. His familiarity with its habitual residents and visitors allows him to take pictures there as part of the ordinary and customary routine of its community life.

"When I take pictures of the everyday [things] in front of me, I do it with a sort of sense of necessity. Always from the same angle, which corresponds to the way in which I live my life, not as a reporter running after the events. I stand in my place, and the people in the stills are the ones who are moving."ⁱⁱⁱ If you look at the contact sheets of Perlov's negatives, you will notice that his mode of action is focused and measured. He responds spontaneously to the stimuli around him, without making any attempt to chase them. Sometimes they appear to be chasing him and posing themselves in

front of his camera. Thus, for example, on the morning of a wintry day, it seems that all the passers-by on the street-corner where Perlov is shooting are deliberately carrying umbrellas that are either red or black. With great patience and attentiveness, he continues shooting long series of photographs, until the stimulus in front of him has exhausted itself. For instance, he might record the people sitting at the table next to him at the café, expending an entire roll of film on the goings-on before him. Throughout the session he will barely alter the camera angle and take great care not to impinge on the awareness of those he is photographing.

“I take many stills [photographs] in the same situation, not in order to find the best among them. These are the habits of the documentary-maker—not to stop the natural flow of every human event... With us these events, I have long noticed, have a special urgency; it is not the photographer who seeks his objects, but they who seek the camera—they beg, they sometimes demand it of you.”^{iv}

Occasionally the course of his life might take him as far as the doctor's clinic, the editing room, the studio or the university, but it is specifically the routine, limited to the small and immediate physical space, which poses a challenge. So he keeps on returning and constantly takes pictures in the same surroundings during the course of the changing seasons and at different times of day. Wondrously, things reveal themselves in a fresh new way every time. In photography outside the home, his focus of interest is on the people around him. He observes how they move in space, and the way in which they regard one another. On a rare occasion he will compose a straightforward portrait, in which the subject takes note of the photographer's presence.

Inside his home, he often takes pictures of his atelier and the objects that surround him, in reference to the tradition of “still-life” composition. Likewise, from the windows of his 14th floor apartment he takes pictures of Tel-Aviv's landscapes, landscape photographs in every respect, following his interest in light and color.

The television to him is a window upon the Israeli and global reality. Through it he also takes pictures of dramas, from which he carefully keeps his distance in his photographic routine. His active and critical observation of the medium of television also enables him to express his social stances in a more direct manner, something

that he intentionally avoids when he observes other photographic objects. The freezing of the cinematic movement onscreen allows him to express personal emphases in regard to society and culture.

Perlov himself is often the object of investigative observation in his photographs, be it by means of swift glances inside the elevator or a curious and probing gaze in the mirrors of his home. He is not averse to using the camera flash as he stands facing the mirror, captured by his vanishing image within the glaring light.

Perlov will look at the results of his photographic work, usually in contact sheets and small test prints, and only on rare occasion will he ask to see finished, professional enlargements. He is not engaged in editing and cataloguing the accumulating material; he leaves the results as they are and returns to his daily routine. His main interest in photography is in the process itself, in the experience of photography, and not necessarily in creating artistic artifacts. For him photography is like sketching swiftly inside a notebook—the collection of rapid impressions from reality. (Perlov often draws and has engaged in draftsmanship over the years with the same intensity as he has in photography, although as regards the former he does not limit himself to drawing directly from reality.)

“Take your picture of me!”

In Perlov’s movie *In Jerusalem* (1963), neighborhood children from the Bukharan quarter of Jerusalem prance in front of his movie camera and vociferously demand, “Take your picture of me!” This original but erroneous Hebrew grammatical usage seemingly instructs him to take his own picture and theirs simultaneously—a direct and simple appeal for attention and confirmation of their existence. Photography allows Perlov to invoke the presence of the people around him and, through them, his own presence as well. “In photography I am able to do this, to retain inside the frame only the necessary, which will betoken the possibility that every man deserves his own measure of pampering. Even a single moment of happiness—and even if it lasts no longer than 1/60 of a second.”^v

Using his camera, then, out of his everyday household life he has gathered banal moments, family members and friends—personal observation that is not in the service

of any idea, narrative or message. He has simply confirmed their presence in his life in this way.

Among the many comers to the London Mini-Store center who have been photographed by Perlov in recent years, security guard Abraham Yichye, who is approximately Perlov's age, has been singled out for attention. The man stands in the entrance to the center holding a metal detector. For many hours each day, he closely examines everyone who comes inside and checks their bags. Those he is familiar with might linger and engage him in rather intimate conversation.

Not far from the security guard, behind his camera, Perlov stands on watch. His curious gaze follows the people who enter the mall. He too examines with interest the changing expressions on their faces, as they step in from the street.

This picture resembles a biographical picture, of which mention is made in one of the episodes of *Diary*. As a ten-year-old, Perlov worked as a salesman in his adoptive grandfather's fabrics shop in "Casa Susanna." From deep within the shop, behind the counter, he could see the street pulsing with life through the shop entrance: the passers-by, the electric-tram drivers from the adjacent tram station, the excited and roaring crowd on its way to a match at the soccer stadium. The hubbub of life would pass before his eyes in the shop entrance, from a safe and secure distance—as in a movie: a constant human flow, like a river's current, the contemplation of which can calm and divert one's mind from its own thoughts. This childhood picture reminds Perlov of something else: "Apropos, when *Diary* was first shown on television, there was this Persian fellow on Ibn-Gvirol Street, who used to iron inside the shop. He said to me: 'I've seen your movie! It's exactly the same thing with me, I see the people outside!'"^{vi} Capturing the rhythm of life in his movie, Perlov awakened in the shopkeeper a similar acknowledgment of the view of the street passing in front of the display window—the sensation of a flowing and relaxing routine.

Perlov, who consciously attempts to avoid the dramas and disturbances of reality and stick to the banal, everyday and routine, positions himself behind the keeper of the threshold, with whom he is acquainted and with whom he identifies. In his photographs Perlov seeks to create a picture of orderly and normal routine. But in the

Israeli reality of these intifada years, it is no ritual or formal role that the security guard plays—his real mission is to risk his life for the security of others.

Between Paris and Tel-Aviv

In September, 2001, after a long and oppressive Israeli summer, Perlov set out to Paris for a change of atmosphere. As on earlier visits, he again stayed at the same hotel on the Left Bank, the Hotel de Continent at the corner of Rue Jacob and Rue Bonaparte—an area laden with memories for him, as he came there when he first arrived in Paris from Brazil in 1952. As part of his daily routine he took pictures in a small and demarcated area, near the hotel, the neighborhood café and restaurant, far from the Paris of historic landmarks and monuments. It was a precise transposition of his mode of action from the restricted space of Tel-Aviv to an alien but familiar environment. In his Parisian surroundings Perlov enjoys an anonymity, far from any personal or professional commitments; he is free to concentrate and observe the rhythm of life without disturbance. In Tel-Aviv Perlov takes pictures in the community to which he himself belongs, he is influenced by his involvement with the people he photographs, and every human occurrence is invested with layers of meaning. It requires conscious effort on his part to isolate the banal and the private from the collective and the historical. In Paris, the mental distance from Israel enables him to observe the human occurrence around him in a way that discloses the universal and the elementary within it. The life surrounding him appears routine and banal; it does not bear the burden of any historic or collective representation.

It was by chance in Paris, then, that he was caught up by what has come to be known as “the events of September 11, 2001, in New York.” The concerns so familiar to him from home suddenly crossed paths with the “normality” of everyday Parisian life.

Between Cinema and Stills

Even in the sixties already, the appearance of Perlov’s stills photographs was immediate, simple and human, devoid of nationalist or social metaphors. In the photographs we see people walking in the street, waiting at a bus-stop, or sitting in a

caf. His camera charts a course that seeks to shorten the distance between life and art, between moments big and small. It is a journey in which Perlov's gaze flirts with the accidental and the haphazard, as in automatic writing. His range of vision is not limited to a defined script, to a budget, to the limitations of equipment or to the presence of crew members—an enormous liberty for someone who has experienced oppressive limitations in his cinematic work.

The state of distress in which Perlov found himself in the early seventies, due to the customary circumstances of cinematic production in Israel, prompted him to redefine his cinematic mode of action in the format of *Diary* (which he began shooting in 1973). Perlov allowed “the flow of life” to dictate the script to him, an idea that was fulfilled in the episodes of his cinematic diary. This dramatic divergence in his artistic activity was undoubtedly made possible as a result of his cumulative experience in stills photography. Photography was a sort of hothouse for testing the ideas and the modes of action, which were implemented later in the cinema Perlov began to create.

The process of gathering visual materials for *Diary* resembled his approach to stills photography: from everyday routine, from the domestic territory, from working days at the university, from encounters with guests who came knocking at the door, from his travels. These raw materials were processed and formulated in a careful and responsible manner in the editing room. The accompanying text, narration and sound became the “cement” that holds together the building blocks of the cinematic edifice he erected. Perlov, whose work on *Diary* was highly concentrated (at a ratio of 1:2-1:3 with respect to edited versus raw photographic material), distilled and refined his creation on its way to the screen.

In his stills photography Perlov was no less concentrated (although here the issue regarding the quantitative ratio was not a factor). But in the stills he was unencumbered by the burden of representation of the working process. The photographs he was making continued to accumulate as a working process in development rather than as products. The photographs defined a space, a studio of sorts or a desktop, a space of action and learning that encourages curious, experimental and adventurous vision.

The relations between the cinema and the photography that he created were sequential and complementary. The cinema was in the forefront, a display window whose exhibits were shapely and well-designed, while photography continued to be a sort of private backyard, in which things could stand in disorder, lacking finished form. On two occasions Perlov made movies that were based on archival stills photographs, which he edited cinematically: *In Thy Blood Live* (1962) and *Silver Tray* (1995). His most recent movie, *My Stills 1952/2002*, is a cinematic essay on Perlov's attitude toward stills photography. In the movie, in addition to his own photographs he also refers to certain select photographers and their photographs. In many senses, the movie is a continuation of *Diary* and *Updated Diary* in a new formal format. In relation to the diaries, this movie is freer in its structure, and it is consciously represented as a process in development rather than a finished product. Actually, this was the first time Perlov ever edited his stills photographs. Several hundred photographs were shot in video out of a vast body of color images, which he photographed in recent years. The photographs were edited on a computer screen in the editing room to the accompanying narration. The narration is similar in its approach to the narration of the diaries, but the rapid pace at which the photographs appear onscreen imposed a faster rate of narration on Perlov, creating a sense of glut and urgency.

For years Perlov has been taking pictures with an Olympus-Pen camera, which fits 72 photographs on a regular roll of film. From the negative produced by this camera, pairs of images separated by a black border can be enlarged and printed on single sheets of photographic paper. This allowed Perlov in a way to "practice" cinematic editing, the black border functioning like a "cut" between two cinematic sequences. "Sometimes the other side of the photograph is in association to its first side. Sometimes one moment on the photograph's left side is another moment on its right side, in an extension so to speak of time or space."^{vii}

The stills chapter in Perlov's most recent movie is experienced as a swift and loaded "magic lantern" show. In the movie stills and cinema merge into a single experience, like the flashing appearance of a sight seen through rapidly blinking eyes.

This formal solution has perhaps been adopted to address Perlov's feelings in regard to the variable power of the photographic image in cinema and in stills. In his

view, “Cinematic moving pictures and photography on television have reached such a saturation point that they are devoid of any pictorial sanctity. Moving pictures have turned into something like the spoken language, without a beginning, continuation or end, a language in which beauty and vulgarity freely mix. The stills picture—which so excited Degas, Delacroix, and even the writer Emile Zola, who bound a collection of his photographs in an album entitled ‘A True Story’ (is this not fictional?)—has to my mind retained its purity, and it can be observed in tranquility. Cinematic photography has routed reality, it no longer hints, whispers or even resembles—it distorts!”^{viii}

Between Photography and Family

In his most recent movie, Perlov refers, among others, to three photographers who were active in the family territory: the noted writer Emile Zola, who enthusiastically photographed the members of his household; Henry Lartigue, who began in his youth to photograph his family members in the opulent routine of their lives; and Henry Roth, set apart from the other two for having clandestinely documented the Holocaust of the Jews in the Lodz ghetto. He was able to do this due to the support of his wife, whose portraits as a young woman appear among his other tragic photographs.

The connection between the medium of photography and family life is driven by the basic and universal desire to tell the family story: the need to forge a link between the present and future and the past. The urge to preserve family memories fulfills itself in photography, because of photography’s unique ability to provide us with a relic and reflection of something that was taken directly from reality.

The aesthetic of the family photo-album has stimulated photographers to investigate the familiar and the banal and to use real snapshots and an impromptu style in their personal work. American photographers—such as Robert Frank, Emmet Gowin, Daniel Seymour, Wendy MacNeil and others—produced work of this kind in the U.S.A. in the late sixties and early seventies of the previous century. They employed photographs and texts from personal and autobiographical experiences, using contact sheets, newspaper clippings, documents and texts in their own handwriting. All these materials gave the feeling of a spontaneous and immediate personal involvement. The photographers Arthur Freed and Phil Perkis, inspired by

the work of eminent photographer Minor White, took a different stylistic path—an aesthetic of direct photography. Under the heading of personal documentation, they engaged intensively in photography in the course of their everyday lives, in which their family members appeared as an integral part of the photographic experience. In Israel, echoes of this kind of photography resounded a while later. Artists who took pictures in the family domain include Avi Ganor, Yair Garbuz, Boaz Tal, Yanni Haaksman-Klasmer, Oded Yedaya, Michael Rorberger, Simcha Shirman and Igal Shemtov. In their work they focus on snapshots, on symbols of cultural status, on the human drama, and on the representations of the family in the history of art. This creative enterprise is motivated by, among other things, a desire to avoid the exhausting labor of dealing directly with Israeli reality, with its weighty historical and ideological burden. These artists are seeking to isolate the personal, private and everyday from the collective and the dramatic. They have also given voice to the experiences of the second generation—the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors.

Perlov himself has never been involved with the routine activities of the community of photographers in Israel. Just the same, his own work parallels theirs and is close to it in content and form.

Between Life and Art

There is not much distance between Perlov's life and his artistic work. His work sketches a significant portion, but not the entirety, of the course of his life. His diaries, photography and drawings contain autobiographical elements, which are included only if they have passed the test of his artistic processing. "I do not know what is personal [and] private [in regard to his movies; S.G.], I do not know how to explain it. It is understood that a diary is in the first-person, I am not a ship's captain keeping a journal, nor am I a military commander filling in the camp ledger. To me every movie is personal, but it needs to be a movie! The autobiography or autobiographical details are of no interest to me! Not that they aren't interesting, for it is mainly when there are painful things... What I'm saying is, it is not an artistic ideal! It is not a privilege! To be a negro slave in the United States, or slaves in Egypt or the victim of folly—this is

not an artistic privilege! It is the worst of all, but it still isn't art. It gives you information about things that exist, but it is information, it isn't art!"^{ix}

Perlov gazes in fascination at the river of time flowing in front of him. He is not searching for its sources, nor for the place where its waters are gathered. With careful attention he attempts to identify the changing rate of flow. As he observes the view before his eyes, he is also attentive to his own changing consciousness. At this moment the photographic frame turns into a locating instrument in his hands, by means of which he seeks to identify the transient from the fixed, the accidental from the deliberate; he seeks to define the private versus the universal.

In the accumulating photographs the shadows of river-banks appear, demarcating the river of life that flows in front of him. These river-banks mark the outline of David Perlov's world.

Shuka Glotman

Mitzpe Abirim

July 2003

ⁱ David Perlov, in a booklet published on the occasion of the exhibition, "David Perlov: Diary-Photographs (selection), March 2001, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa Cinematheque."

ⁱⁱ The movie, which was produced by the Israel Film Service and Belfilms, was first screened on 14 July 2003 in the framework of the Vulgin competition for Israeli cinema at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Perlov, from the written proposal for the movie *My Stills 1952/2002*.

^{iv} David Perlov, from a booklet published on the occasion of the group photographic exhibition, "An Homage to the Family Album," exhibited at the gallery of the photography department, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, April 1988. The exhibition was curated by Shuka Glotman and a group of students.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} From recorded conversations, held pending the exhibition in Perlov's studio in Tel-Aviv, on 11 and 20 May, 2003.

^{vii} David Perlov, in a booklet published on the occasion of the exhibition, "David Perlov: Diary-Photographs (selection), March 2001, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa Cinematheque."

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} From a conversation chaired by Meyer Schnitzer on the occasion of the premiere of *My Stills 1952/2002* at Beth Shmuel in Jerusalem on 16 July, 2003. The conversation was held in the framework of "cinematic encounters" of the forum of documentary filmmakers at the Jerusalem Film Festival.