

Family Album of Sorts

Gilad Reich in Conversation with Leigh Orpaz

G: I would like to start our conversation with a specific photograph, which gave the book its title, *American Optical*. This is a photo of two old monitors, probably from the 1970s. This photograph embodies many aspects that relate to this project: First of all, like other photographs in the book, it was taken by your father. Second, it shows us a certain technology - the monitors - as an object of fascination and interest. And third, the two monitors tie in with the duplication motif, which is a recurring theme in the book. What drew you to this image?

L: I was very interested in this photograph, because it stands out in my father's body of work. My father was a photographer. He studied at SVA in New York but didn't get a chance to pursue photography professionally because he passed away at the age of 28, when I was three and a half. Over the years I didn't feel a connection to his photographic style, since he was very influenced by the 1970s New York

snapshot, and I was more interested in staged photography. But I think that if he would have continued to photograph, there is a good chance he would have gravitated to the places that this photograph explores: objects, scenery, situations. This is a photograph about the gaze - looking at monitors in which we are seen. I even tried seeing if you can catch my father's reflection in the monitors, but you cannot. That would have been nice, because then he would have appeared like an apparition of sorts. And there is his fascination with technology, which today seems somewhat ludicrous because when we look at these objects they are practically fossils. But I can understand why he took this picture. There is something about this analogue device that is like a magic box. It is way more interesting than a screen that is so thin, it is about to turn into a hologram in space.

And yes, this photograph also holds duplication, which I cannot really put into words what I like about it. The

book has another photograph, one that I bought on eBay, of the sisters at the sea. You cannot tell from the photo if they are twins, but they look very much alike, and this likeness – similar but not identical – fascinates me. The monitors too – they seem identical, but if you give it another look, you can see they are a little different – each has a different serial number, for instance. For me, the meaning of the duplication lies in the nuance of “almost identical” and not in the search for differences. Can something be completely identical to something else? I don’t think so. There is a reflexive aspect here, because photography as a medium is characterized by its duplicability, it can be reproduced. And here the duplication exists within the photograph itself. Not that I think that is what interested my father in this photograph, but he managed to create a very simple and precise photograph. And that is something I really like. A photograph that is accurate in its simplicity. A photograph that can encapsulate an interesting statement in a very concise way.

G: We already exposed that this book features photographs by your father and photographs that you bought on eBay. But it also contains photographs by your grandfather and photographs that you took. Is there a common thread that passes through all the photographs? One theme that interests you? Maybe this is actually a family album of sorts.

L: I think that the only thing that links all the photographs in the book, their common language, is me. Both my father and my grandfather have lots of photographs, some are family photographs, some are perhaps less visually compelling, but I pulled out from their archives certain photographs that only come together through my perspective. This of course immediately brings up the debate concerning appropriation: what do you do when you appropriate an image that is not yours? But I think this debate has become less relevant today, when we are living in a world that is so flooded with images. The question today is what you do with the image, not where you took it from. How do the images function together as a book? Does the juxtaposition of the photographs bring out a new quality in them? Do they offer an interesting photographic perspective? After all, I appropriate the images as they are. Perhaps after some Photoshop retouching, when needed. And that is why the medium of a book is so important – browsing through the pages, understanding the order of things, the associations between them. I have been living with some of these images for years, collecting and looking at them alongside my own practice. And all of a sudden, they are the actual artwork.

G: Let’s go back for a moment. What can you tell me about your father as a photographer? Did you start photographing in his footsteps?

L: Me picking up photography had to do with the photography equipment that was left at the house after my father died, which is basically all that was left of him. My mom simply got rid of all of his stuff, she didn’t even leave a shirt. I get that, everyone deals with loss differently. She also gave away most of his photography equipment but the lens, camera, and boxes with his photographs and negatives were left at home. I don’t know if I really remember him or only remember him from his photographs. This is something that has always fascinated me – how we remember in pictures and not in moving images. But I knew him mostly through his photographs. Up to the age of three and a half, I have a massive album of photos that he took of me, but then there are several years when there are no photos of me at all. When my mother met Uri, who appears in the book in the two photographs of the man and the car in the desert, I went back to being photographed. It turns out that Uri is also a good photographer, so you could say that the men I grew up with were all photographers.

At a later age, I started to try and understand who my father was, like all kids who don’t have a parent. And so, I started rummaging through what was left. I remember that I kept looking for texts, but only found images and asked my mom how is that possible? Didn’t he have notebooks? Didn’t he write anything? Didn’t he have a sketchbook that he worked with? It drove me crazy. And to this day I haven’t found anything

he wrote, except for one page with notes about Henri Cartier-Bresson, because he probably started teaching about him somewhere.

When I studied at Bezalel’s Photography Department, I kept it secret that my father was a photographer, because I didn’t want to start getting psychologist interpretations for my works. I was worried that people would link what I am doing to my story, so I didn’t share this biographical detail. Only in my solo show *Like it Never Happened* at Inga Gallery in 2011, I exhibited his portrait, the one that is also included in this book. I guess in a way, this was coming to terms with this thing. And since then, I decided to exhibit an image by him in every show. In the end, it turns out that I usually display at least one picture by him in each exhibition, and then I also started exhibiting photographs by my grandfather.

G: And how did you learn of your grandfather’s photographs collection?

L: The grandfather who took pictures was my mother’s dad, and I was very connected to him. All the things that other kids usually do with their dad, I did with him: he taught me card games, how to ride a bike, and took me to synagogue on the holidays. But I never saw the photographs, I only knew they existed. My grandfather was a compulsive hoarder of useless things and he had a shed where he kept everything very organized. Not so long before he passed, my grandfather



Thames Town, 04:34 min, 2016, loop

and grandmother moved into an assisted living facility and had to clear the house. Suddenly, my entire family had to deal with his hoarding. A heap of slide boxes and some 8 mm films were left, and I didn't have the heart to let them throw it all away, so I took it to my studio. To this day, whenever I see photographs or photo albums in a flea market, I feel a little bit sad. These are images of people that used to mean something for someone, and today no one remembers them, no one remembers who they were. When you are alive, you keep holding on to images - images of your family, of people you know, memories of events, and then, once you die - the album that was so important to you finds its way to a market. I have bought several albums like these. I don't know who

the people in the photographs are, but it is as if I appropriate their memory. And for the same reason I took in all of my grandfather's boxes. Only after he passed away I really started delving into the photographs.

G: The pictures that your grandfather took are very different from your father's photographs stylistically, even though both of them depict a very international environment.

L: Most of my grandfather's photos are from his trips in Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, usually with his friend Yoske, who appears in some of the photographs in the book. These were extensive, several week-long trips. There is a nice story about my grandfather and Yoske playing the

slot machines in a casino in Reno, Nevada, and all of a sudden the machine started ringing and making sounds and they were freaked out, they thought they broke it. So they ran away and only later realized that they in fact won. I love this story because it is funny, and evokes empathy, and it is touching - my grandfather as a Holocaust survivor who didn't have an easy life, and his encounter with the opulence and wealth he saw in the U.S. He was a very ambitious and resourceful man and changed many jobs throughout his life, some of them physical, hard jobs, and I can see from the photographs that he looks at the U.S. with great admiration.

It was very interesting to discover his photographs. He used a 35 format and had an eye for it - his frames are so accurate! The construction of the composition, the colors. He shot with an analog camera, where you have to adjust the aperture, shutter, and so on without seeing the outcome. This is not a simple thing to do, particularly if you aren't a professional photographer. He often staged his subjects, directed them. As a photographic style, I feel more connected to his photographs than to my father's. The most interesting thing is that although my grandfather was a really good photographer, I don't think he ever imagined that photography can be a profession.

G: Is there anything that you took from his photography?

L: By the time I got to my grandfather's photographs, my outlook as a photographer was already formed, so it is hard to say that he influenced me, but I go back to his photographs a lot. They interest me and I appreciate him as a photographer. Today I understand that photography was very important to him and I can see that by the way that he arranged his slides. The ones he photographed and the ones that he bought. For instance, the slides that he bought at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington - the red slides with the images of spaceships and stars that appear in the book - I found them in the sleeves with the photos that he took on his trips. They were not kept separately from his pictures but prepared to be projected as part of the trip's photos. I recognized them because they had the National Air and Space Museum logo and their format was different. They are red because they were produced in a low quality in the first place and deteriorated over time.

G: So, when you incorporate in the book photographs by your father and your grandfather and slides that you bought on eBay, you are in fact doing something similar to what your grandfather did when he included the bought slides with the documentation of his trip.

L: In certain respects, yes, but then there is the question: what makes a photograph "mine"? Do found photographs taken by my grandfather and father become different photographs when I appropriate them? Does the familial

relationship make them “mine”? And if not, what does? I believe that the choice of images that aren't your own is still your choice. You turn to a certain image because you are attracted to it. A little bit like a curator. Some of the images in the book have been with me for a long time. These are images that I return to time after time, trying to understand what attracts me in that image in particular, why this one? Does it trigger something emotional? Do I like something visual about its composition? A certain color scheme?

I see this book as an exhibition: a series of visual sentences comprised of various pieces that together form a language, which is the exhibition. And sometimes, in the course of constructing this language, something is missing. And the important realization that I had is that it doesn't have to be my photograph in order to complete the project. I can find another source for images, for instance, buy them online. And so, I started buying images on eBay. For me, once they are assembled together, there is no hierarchy between the photographs. It is just like the albums at the flea market – once you take someone else's images, it doesn't matter anymore what their original memory was. You already imbue them with new content that emanates from the grouping of the images. This is sort of what I was trying to do with this tactic.

G: Can you try to define which images spark something in you? What makes you choose one image over another?

L: There are some images that trigger something in me, like an inventory of images that I go back to again and again, and you can see this in the book as well: explosions, natural disasters, suits, men in suits, waterfalls, bears. Long before I found the photograph of the bear that my grandfather took, I created a video work with a dancer and a bear – I dressed a friend in a bear costume and asked him to dance with another friend, when they hardly move and only the lights around them change. It was a very realistic costume, and in the photograph, it is hard to tell whether it is a bear or a bear costume. But I was very excited to come across this photograph because it is accurate. If I were there, I suppose I would have taken the same photograph. When I saw this photograph in my grandfather's boxes, it was obvious to me that it has to be in the book.

But the trigger that drives me doesn't have to be an image. Sometimes it is also a poem I read or a movie I saw. There is a poem by Brecht that Roi Kuper, who was my teacher at Bezalel, once told me I should know about. He quoted the words by heart and there was a line that was very significant for me:

“The woman I slept seven years with / Greet me politely on the landing and / Passes by / Smiling.”¹

¹ “Ten Poems from a Reader for Those who Live in Cities,” *Bertold Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, John Willett and Ralph Manheim with the cooperation of Erich Fried (eds.) (Routledge, 1979), p. 143.

This poem as a whole, and this line specifically, deals with the experience of someone who was very close to you becoming a stranger. It was something that I was really interested in – that feeling. It is an outside view, but an outside view of your own life. And this feeling – how from a great intimacy you pass someone by, nod, and continue on your way – this was the starting point of the exhibition *Like it Never Happened*. Exactly this elusiveness.

G: So these triggers are in fact a part of your work process as an artist?

L: Yes. Sometimes I encounter something that I cannot put into words and then I see it out there, in the world, and I take it with me. It becomes a means of sorts. This is what happened with the images in the book, and also with the poem. It has something to do with my intuitive work style. Sometimes, I actually see things in my mind, how they should be, both in video and in stills. The video work *Thames Town*, for instance, started this way. But it is also important for me to not completely stage the photograph. I stage the situation, I prepare the setting, I bring the person, but it is important for me that something else will happen there on its own. That within this staged set up, something that isn't mine will emerge, something that isn't controlled.

For example, in the photograph of the man in a suit by the waterfall, it was not supposed to be a still photograph at all, it was supposed to be a video work.

But then there was a moment when the subject's body gestures interested me, and those people in the frame, and it all clicked for me. I felt that I had already seen this image in my mind. I saw the image of a man in a suit and behind him the waterfall. It was just like a vision, a lightbulb moment. It is amazing when this happens, when the image in your head and the image in front of the camera meet. If the vision comes to life while I'm working, it's very exciting. And if it doesn't work, then I know it isn't a good piece.

G: Although your stills are different from your video works, in both cases you create an image that looks at reality differently, an image comprised of the materials of life but one that is also on the threshold of reality, sometimes creating a certain alienation from it.

L: My photographic attitude has to do with the type of person I am, which is a person who observes. I believe you can learn a lot about what's going on around you without making a lot of fuss. I have a good memory for encounters with people and the setting in which they took place. I am interested in human nuances and small gestures. How people move, what they wear. When you aren't a part of the circle but outside of it, you are there, observing, and this is the process that sometimes leads to a photograph. Looking from the outside in is an intermediate space, like the intermediate space between still photography and video, which I am interested in.

I also associate this perspective with the attempt to step away from the stories we tend to project on people, situations, or photographs we meet. As people, we have this tendency to construct a story. I mean, you never completely know what goes on with someone else, or what is the story behind a certain picture. The same is true about my family photos. No one ever told me the backstory to each and every picture. Instead of trying to see things as they appear, we are asking why is this person there? What is he doing there? And try to outline contexts. I am trying to let go of the story for a moment. To defuse it. I am trying to think about the image itself. To break away from the story, because, at the end of the day, the story is always the story that I tell myself.

G: Did you also try to move away from the story in the case of *American Optical*, despite the familial and emotional contexts?

L: During the work process, I spent long hours looking at my father's and grandfather's photographs. But the choices I made were completely intuitive. I put aside photographs I liked (this is also how I started to mess up my grandfather's very tidy archive) and then I went back to this group and made another selection, and so on. The choices were not based on a methodical system, but I admit that there is something about my father's images that is more emotionally effective, and something about my grandfather's images that I respond to

on a visual level. In my grandfather's case, if I would have seen these images elsewhere I would have responded to them in the same manner. And in my father's case, perhaps I am less fond of his style, but I really love the images because they are emotionally charged. Sometimes you can see my mother or the settings I know I grew up in, so I feel that they are connected to me on the biographical level.

I assume that this is where my story comes into play when I'm lining up my emotional considerations. In dad's photographs, I am constantly searching for my memory in the photo. It is such a cliché - memory and photography. But it is there, you can't help it. This is the story that I am telling myself. I think that the structure of the book, the combination of different types of images, helps me shift away from the search and produce a new story, possibly a new memory, out of this whole thing. Or perhaps I should say, an idea of a memory. After all, this is a family album of sorts, there is nothing you can do about it.