

Reflection on Mali De-Kalo's "Five Signs, Chronology," / Yair Barak

Five photographs are at the core of Mali De-Kalo's show, all family portraits, each selected by the artist in cooperation with a family member. They are described in great detail by the family members, who are seated in front of a stationary video camera. The spoken text tells the story of the photograph, and much more.

The absent, the present, and the account

A significant feature in De-Kalo's short films is what is not displayed in the show. This might be stating the obvious, since art has always been dealing with the absent as present, starting with Pliny's tale of how painting was born from drawing of the shadow of the lost beloved, through the key not-present, absent figure in the monotheistic age – God. Later on, modernistic art signified presence and absence through orphaned objects: a pair of shoes, a tossed garment, an empty chair. But De-Kalo's approach veers from that empty chair or the beloved's shadow; these are outlines of absence. She does not point to the absent, but rather makes it present in a detailed, lengthy way, through the narrative of the "witnesses." It is present in every imaginable way, and yet refuses to be seen.

Roland Barthes¹—argues in his important article "*The Photographic Message*" that the photographic image has been taken over by its denotational message; so much that it can hardly be described. In other words, Barthes argues that a photograph is (allegedly) a description of reality, and thus cannot be described. De Kalo challenged Barthes's argument by introducing to the family members one photograph from the recent past, and asking them to do just that – describe what they see in the image. Allegedly. The term **description** alludes to an analog act. Description is a translation of the visual into the verbal. But the viewer quickly discovers, in De-Kalo's work, how individual each reading is. The subjects who are looking at the photographs tell a story which reflects only partially what their eyes can see. They project onto the image their memories, their traumas, their biographies, themselves. To invoke Barthes further, we can say now that the photographic image's denotation demands connotation, which endows each photograph with a different narrative stance. Moreover, the narrative accompanying the photograph often seems to be somewhere outside of it.

In her book *On Photography*,² Susan Sontag asserts that "through photographs every family constructs its own chronology of portraits, a fluid collection of pictures which testifies to its cohesiveness, regardless of what the photographed activities might be, as long as the photographs are lovingly made and collected. Taking photos has become a ritual of family life, while at the same time, in the industrialized countries of Europe and North America, the institution of family is undergoing a radical process of scrutiny". Indeed, it seems that still today, forty years after the publication of Sontag's work and as the photographic outlook is undergoing a revolution, when the family as an institution has lost its stability and its traditional definition,

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Photographic Message*, 1961

² Susan Sontag, *On photography*, 1977

family photography is still going strong. In many of her works of recent years, De-Kalo has examined the immediate family as a construction and as an entity. She identifies the family as a cultural unit attesting to a broader network, as a social and epochal case study.

Chronology and gaze

The system of chronologies and gazes which De-Kalo weaves into her work is highly sophisticated. Her camera confronts the subject directly and intimately. The camera's gaze does not rest. De-Kalo herself, alongside the camera, casts another gaze. The subject casts a double gaze: at the photograph, scanning, scrutinizing; and at the camera, arbitrating the evident. There is another gaze, the absent gaze, a disquieting one. It is the past gaze of the subjects in the photograph into the photographer's lens. A vast share of what might be called the connotative message of the photograph is contained in that gaze, which we cannot experience. The idea of time receives an even more complex treatment: the photographic moment is the substance of the work, the moment the photograph had been taken and had acquired its meaning. Many of the texts spoken by the family members describe the chain of events leading to the moment in which the photograph had been taken. This time axis precedes the photograph itself. Later, the photographic moment is being established (De-Kalo's). The monologues happen at a later point on the axis, as the speakers are looking back. Finally there's viewing time – the moment in which the visitor at the show experiences the layered, dense chronology, as a photograph turns space into two dimensions, volume into image, and depth into surface.

The description is a story (the story is therapy)

The question each subject is asked, "What happened," refers us to several fields: testimony, story-telling, and therapy. The subjects describe what had been; they participate in a scheme of parallel testifying, with no exchange among them. They deliver to the camera their own versions of the events. Obviously, we end up with several histories. While the family album creates a hegemonic narrative of the family's history, the parallel testimonies subvert and disrupt the single story.

Story-telling and reading aloud are central acts in De-Kalo's work in recent years; they have become both an artistic practice and an object of examination. In the series "Dinner Stories" the artist reads bed-time stories to her daughter, with a significant shift – these are philosophical and political texts (Finkelkraut, Baudrillard), which create an inherent conflict, distressing and sometimes amusing. In "Relaying," De-Kalo photographs women in their homes, reading to the camera testimonies of women, mothers, who tell the stories of their separation from their children following a break-up of the family unit, and of the fathers' turning of the children against them. Here too a story related by one subject is passed on to another, who in turn tells the story of the first.

In "Five Signs, Chronology" the act of speaking acquires a therapeutic quality. When the artist asks her subjects to articulate what they see she adopts the most basic tenet of psychoanalysis:

“speak!” When the subjects respond to the instruction their consciousness opens up, as does their subconscious. When the subjects describe the content of the photograph they sometimes go from a simple description of the scene to a more emotional account, rooted in personal biography, the past, their gender, and their own identity within the family. This stream of consciousness might lead to tears, laughter, or embarrassment. We may also consider the place of the artist in this complex array. She is behind the camera, unseen by us, unheard, although we are aware of her presence. Traditionally, the psychotherapist sits behind the patient, who is reclining on a couch. The patient does not see the therapist’s face or expressions; only his voice is heard occasionally. Likewise, we do not see the therapeutic force applied within De Kalo’s human assemblage, but we accept its existence as essential.

In recent years photography had become a therapeutic tool in the field of photo-therapy, but the use of photography has been known much earlier, in the middle of the 20th century, in psychoanalytic testing (Thematic Apperception Tests). Most of them made use of illustrations, but apparently these were based on photographs. Michal Heiman’s ongoing project comes to mind, in which she developed transference tests based on the interpretation of photographs. Heiman shows her “patients” images they have never seen before, and they tell her what they don’t know about them. De Kalo, conversely, shows her subjects photographs they know well, of an event they have experienced. The encounter with the familiar, or the quasi-familiar, is like pushing a button which activates a range of feelings and yearnings, uncontrollable impulses and emotions, which gush out of the photograph and out of the gaze of the subjects.

An incomplete puzzle

With just a photograph, before the “testimonies” were given, the story had been coherent. A photograph always carries the inherently photographic quality of being contained within itself. It does not require interpretation or a history. The moment the artist asks the subjects to describe what had been, that coherence falls apart and the photograph becomes cracked and fragmented, creating something which cannot be seen. I imagine a family portrait hanging on the wall. In a moment of carelessness it is hit by a ball; it cracks, never again to be a complete image. Such is also the nature of De-Kalo’s disintegrating photographs. They start whole, fall apart, and are re-assembled, but, like an old puzzle which is missing some of its parts, none of the stories would again be what it was before, and we, the viewers, are left with the sense that although the photograph had been re-assembled, the cracks have replaced the meaningful sequences essential to the understanding of the initially incoherent family structure. Photography is notorious for fragmenting reality and for taking things out of context. Here, in De-Kalo’s work, these immanent qualities become a toolbox for the subversion of the social order, which is taken for granted in the photograph.

W. G. Sebald³, the German writer, describes it well in his book, *Austerlitz*: “Our preoccupation with history is the poring over pictures made well in advance, engraved onto the inner space of

³ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 2001

our heads, and we stare at them constantly, while the truth is to be found elsewhere, in the margins, were no one had thought to look.”