The Vision & Art Project

Chronicling the Intersection of Macular Degeneration & the Arts

Oral history interview with Philip Perkis
Interview conducted in 2023; transcribed, reviewed and made available to the public in 2025

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Philip Perkis
Conducted by A'Dora Phillips & Brian Schumacher
At Stony Point, New York
2023 January 19 & April 14

A'Dora Phillips and Brian Schumacher jointly conducted this oral history with the photographer Philip Perkis on January 19, 2023, and April 14, 2023, at the artist's home and studio in Stony Point, New York. Perkis's wife, the artist Cyrilla Mozenter, was present and participated in both sessions.

On January 19, we talked to Perkis about growing up in Brookline, Massachusetts, the son of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine; his poor performance in school (he would learn at the age of fifty that this was because he was dyslexic); how his academic struggles at Brandeis University led him to enlist in the Air Force in the early 1950s; his experience as a tail gunner on a B-36 heavy bomber; how important the visual world has always been to him; and how one of his colleagues in the Air Force, James Mitchell, introduced him to photography.

On April 14, we talked a little bit more about his family; his experience of traveling and making photographs—including a series of photographs of Mexico for which he received a Guggenheim Fellowship; how he never prints the vast majority of the pictures he shoots; how he decides which pictures to print by looking at the negatives; how he's less interested in the subject he photographs than the tone; his appreciation for the work of Alfred Stieglitz, Timothy O'Sullivan, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Robert Frank; how when he started taking pictures in the 1950s photography wasn't considered an art by

most and photographers were not celebrities; and meeting his wife, Cyrilla Mozenter, and their ongoing artist connection and collaboration.

We also discussed how he likes to "swim" in mystery and his idea of correspondence: that the voice of an artist derives from the subjects they find in the world that correspond to something within them that they can channel. We talked about his book, *Teaching Photography*, which contains some of his most fundamental understandings of both photography and life. In this session we also discussed his vision loss from a retinal occlusion and macular degeneration.

Both sessions were videotaped. They were transcribed the spring of 2025. This manuscript includes transcripts of both sessions. It has been lightly edited for accuracy and clarity and reviewed by Philip Perkis. The reader should bear in ming that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Uploaded to the Vision & Art Project website on June 26, 2025.

Session 1: Recorded January 19, 2023

A'Dora Phillips: We'd love to know about your childhood: where you were born and raised, who your parents were, the milieu in which you grew up.

Philip Perkis: My parents immigrated from Ukraine, from a small Jewish town near Odessa. They came in the teens. I don't know when exactly. They were very secretive about their past. So I don't know that much about it.

My father came with no relatives at all. He apparently was from a wealthy family, and he ran away. The rest of his family was killed, some by the Cossacks and some by the Bolsheviks. He was very damaged by that.

My mother came with her four sisters, a brother, and her mother. My mother's father had come eight years before them to Boston and worked as a house painter to save up money for tickets for his family. My grandmother apparently ran a dry-goods store in the village they came from and took care of the five kids until they could leave. When they came to the U.S., they went through Ellis Island and up to Boston.

A little aside, which can explain a lot. I was with my mother on the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. My father had already passed away, and my mother was living in Florida, where Jews go to die. We were watching TV together. It was all about the Statue of Liberty and the celebration.

I said to her, "It must have been very exciting to see the Statue of Liberty." And she said, "What? Are you kidding? We were sick. We were terrified. We didn't know if anybody would beat us. We didn't know the language at all. We had no money and didn't know anything about what was going on. We didn't care about a statue. I don't even remember seeing it." So that was the atmosphere of their young lives and their arrival in this country.

Phillips: What was it like for you growing up?

Perkis: My father was very smart and became very successful. So we became solid middle-class people by the late 1930s. I was born in 1935. We lived in Brookline, Massachusetts, in a single-family house. We were very prosperous. My father drove an Oldsmobile.

I had a sister. She was good at school, and I was very bad at school. I failed everything. It turned out that I'm quite dyslexic, but that wasn't really diagnosed until I was fifty years old. So when I was young, I was considered lazy and a dreamer.

In high school I was sent away to a prep school because I was getting bad grades. I went there for two years, and then I got into Brandeis University because it was a new college, and they didn't have dormitories built yet. As a result, anybody who was willing to commute to the college without needing a room was let in if you had a high school diploma. So I got a high school diploma from that prep school, because the standards were very low and they nursed you through the classes. I went to Brandeis for a year. I didn't go to class much, and I failed all the courses. So I was asked to leave.

But I'm drawing a picture of this miserable young person. And I wasn't always miserable. I had friends. I did sports, and I loved being outdoors. I had all kinds of outdoor adventures. I was in the Boy Scouts and was quite good at

that. I was a leader. I loved camping out. I played baseball, I played football. I wasn't always lonely and miserable, but it was about being a failure.

I was eighteen when I flunked out of college and was living with my parents, which at that time wasn't really acceptable. Now it is. And in other countries, it's very acceptable. But at that time, if you were living with your parents when you were finished with high school, it was like, "What's wrong with you?"

I had always loved airplanes. I built model airplanes when I was a kid. There was a real romance to flying. And although I had not been on a plane at that time, I joined the Air Force, naively thinking I would fly. Also, that was the early 1950s, so there was still a draft. Had I not enlisted, I would've been drafted into the army quite soon. When I got in, I realized that over 90 percent of the people who flew were officers. I was not an officer and wasn't about to be one. So I realized I had blown it. I wasn't going to be flying.

But then I did. I became a tail gunner on a B-36 heavy bomber.

Phillips: I didn't realize that you had spent a year at Brandeis. That's interesting to hear. But thinking about your being in the Air Force, can you describe the experience for us of being on a bomber?

Perkis: I became a tail gunner through some real luck and a little bit of manipulation on my part. I was on a crew, a B-36 crew, which is between twelve and fourteen men, depending on the missions and stuff like that. It was

the heavy bomber that replaced the B-29, which is the bomber that dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So it was a huge airplane, ten engines, and it was a complete disaster of a plane.

I was not in the back. The tail gunner was not near the tail guns. I was forty feet forward of that in a compartment with either two or three other people. The guns were controlled by radar. And so I learned how to maintain and use the radar system, which at that time was before transistors. So it was all vacuum tubes. The chances of it functioning 100 percent correctly in a combat situation—they used to say it was between 0 percent and 1 percent that it would be successful. But that was my job, and I was pretty good at it. The plane was huge. I mean, unbelievably big—I think it's the largest airplane ever made except for the Spruce Goose of Howard Hughes.

We used to fly for between twenty-two and thirty hours and with no refueling. So we carried enormous amounts of fuel. It had six propeller engines and four jets, and the jets were used to take off in climbing. When some of the propeller engines failed, which they did nearly every mission, we would use the jets to fill in to keep us going.

So I'm sitting in the back of the plane and my main job was not the gunnery but just simply looking out the bubble on one or the other side of the back of the plane to keep my eye on the engines and look for other aircraft. Hour after hour after hour of sitting in a chair with a parachute on my back and headphones, because it was so loud back there you couldn't talk without headphones. Frequently an oxygen mask on too. Just watching.

I think that's one of the factors that made me a photographer—just sitting hour after hour after hour in this incredibly, painfully unpleasant environment of the noise and the smell and the motion and stuff like that, looking out at the ocean and the sky and the clouds and the land and the changing light. The way I put it at one point was, I'm sitting in hell looking at heaven. That's my Air Force story. Except I haven't talked about photography in the Air Force yet.

Brian Schumacher: Would you say that was when you became cognizant or more conscious of the visual world in that dialectic between the environment you were in and what you were looking out at?

Perkis: Well, the word *cognizant* is tricky because I don't know what I knew about what I was doing. I don't know. I don't know how conscious I was of this thing happening to me. I just knew that I loved looking. And I realized when I was young that because I wasn't good at writing and reading and arithmetic, it was all in the eyes.

It was all looking. And this is ironic. When I was going to go on flying status . . . I mean, when you go into the military, you get a physical and you have to be in decent shape. But if you're going to fly, you have to be in much better shape. And so you go through a whole other physical examination that lasts a few days. It turned out that I had very strange vision that was unusually good. It was something like 20/12. I could read newspapers six feet away, and my

near vision was perfect. So I had unusually good vision. Which made sense to me because I always was looking.

Phillips: You mean when you were a kid, you were always looking?

Perkis: Yeah. I mean, I didn't know I was doing that. But when I started photographing, and then when I started teaching, and I realized how most people don't look—they just don't *look*—I realized that I was just looking. One of the therapists I saw later in my life said, "Well, that's how you could survive, was to watch for visual clues."

I could see the atmosphere. I could see what people were feeling. And so, becoming a photographer when I was twenty-one, it was like, "Of course." It was finding where I belonged in my life.

Phillips: As I understand it, your first experience of starting to take pictures happened when you were still in the Air Force, and you met somebody who took pictures himself, right?

Perkis: It was a strange thing. There was another person on the crew who was a weather gunner, and we became very good friends. He was African American. And you have to understand that the Air Force at that time—I assume all of the military at that time—was a southern racist culture. The military had only been integrated in 1948. Truman integrated it.

And so a lot of the lifers had joined the military when it was a segregated organization. When it got integrated, they didn't like it at all. And so the fellow who was the weather gunner—the weather gunner men take weather readings while you're flying—and I became good friends. He was an intellectual. He ended up being a very famous, very militant poet named Amiri Baraka. We remained friends—I mean, occasional friends—until he died about five years ago. When we saw each other, it was delightful. Anyway, he was a reader and a writer and a poet. He was young, he was in his twenties. We used to go to the library together and read books. I would say he taught me how to read books. I mean, I knew how to read *technically*, certainly, but he taught me about literature, about really good literature.

There was another guy, James Mitchell, who was also Black. He was a mechanic on the ground crew of our plane, and we got to be friends. He was a photographer, a very serious photographer, and remained one for the rest of his life. We stayed friends also.

And so I started reading books and poetry and listening to music. And then I saw these photographs that Jim was doing. And I thought, "Hmm." He took me to the base store and we bought a camera. He showed me how to use it. And then he took me to the darkroom of the hobby center—all military bases have hobby centers for the people, for the servicemen. So he took me to the darkroom and showed me how to develop film and how to make a print. I was home. That was it. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I did that for about—I don't know, a year, year and a half, in the military. I couldn't photograph around the plane or I'd still be in jail. But off base and stuff like that.

Schumacher: I'm sorry to interrupt, but is it possible for you to think back to then and describe how you knew you were home or what were you feeling? Or what did photography provide for you that resonated so well?

Perkis: Probably the best thing which may not be what we're trying to do here is magic. I saw evidence of life and meaning. Also, around that time, Robert Frank's book *The Americans* was published in France. How that happened I don't know, but Amiri had a copy of it, and so I saw the book and it absolutely changed me. Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" came out. Do you know that poem?

Phillips: Yes.

Perkis: I found a culture where I felt I belonged. And I could go around with this camera and—I don't know, there's no words for it—I could express *correspondence*. I had no words for it then. This is seventy years later, or sixty-eight years later. I found things outside of me that matched what was inside me, my sadness and my loneliness, and my sense of beauty and my sense of space, and my sense of just the melancholy beauty and wonder of the world.

And it's still there. I can't see it, but it's there. I mean, actually, I can see it because what I'm seeing now is really beautiful, two shapes and the glowing of light around you.

Schumacher: That's really beautifully put. Thank you for sharing that.

Perkis: I don't know if that makes . . .

Schumacher: It makes a lot of sense, of course.

Perkis: I don't know. Does that answer your question?

Schumacher: Very much so. I think it's an interesting topic, and I think the way you expressed that as finding a correspondence seems very consistent with your photographs. I'm wondering if you can talk about how you describe your photographs often as being—and forgive me for not having the right words—not emotional in their content. That you're just pointing and shooting basically at something without thinking in that way. The way you describe it in hindsight is one of finding correspondence with these internal feelings that you have. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Perkis: Yes, but we're no longer on autobiography, because this is stuff that I was able to articulate only many, many decades later. But what is functioning is that when I'm taking pictures, when I'm actually focusing, setting the f-stops and shutter speeds, stuff like that, and releasing the shutter, I'm trying to not think about content at all. I'm just trying to get it right, and I shoot very quickly. Cyrilla [Philip's wife, Cyrilla Mozenter] can vouch for that.

I shoot very quickly, even when the thing I'm taking a picture of isn't moving. I don't spend time looking and a little of this, a little of that. I shoot very quickly because I don't want to overintellectualize the structure of the picture. Allen

Ginsberg says it perfectly: "First thought, best thought." I photograph quickly and I take a lot of pictures. The editing is where I sense correspondence. The quality that what's going on out there is talking to something that's going on in here, here, and here. And that's the editing process.

For the last twenty-five or thirty years I haven't made proofs. I don't make contact sheets. I develop a film, and I put those sheets, the strips of film, into these clear plastic holders. And so it's a sheet with thirty-six images. And then I sit at a light box with a very good magnifier, and I just look at each frame. When I feel something—because frequently you can't even tell what it's a picture of when you're looking at the negatives—when I see something that does something, I print it. That's my editing process. So I take no documentary responsibility for anything.

Even though I've photographed in a lot of different places in the world, I don't claim to have documented anything or explained what anything is like. It's just what I saw. I went to Mexico, and this is what I looked at. I went to Egypt, and this is what I looked at. I went to Israel, and this is what I looked at. I went to Stony Point, New York, and this is what I looked at. So I'm not a documentary photographer in any sense. I don't know if that answers your question at all.

Schumacher: Very much so. It's very interesting, and I think this is all on topic with the biography for sure.

Phillips: You got out of the military in 1958, I believe.

Perkis: Yes.

Phillips: And you went to San Francisco. Why did you choose to go to San Francisco?

Perkis: It was as far as I could get away from Boston without getting wet. Well, in 1958, it was the Beat Generation. I don't know if you know about the Beat Generation.

Phillips: Yes, I know.

Perkis: You do?

Phillips: A fair amount. I studied literature in college and have read a lot of the writers associated with the movement. I especially like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder's work.

Perkis: I was enamored of the Beat Generation. The day I got out of the Air Force I stopped shaving and let my hair grow long. I didn't wear black clothes particularly, but I was very interested in the art of the Beats and the idea of being an outsider, perhaps because of the way I was raised. My father was a paranoid because of his—I don't know because of what—but he was a very paranoid person. And so he only wanted to fit in.

His constant angry question to me was, "Why can't you just be normal?" So I was enamored of the Beats. I thought they knew things, and that was my

entrance to culture. At that time, for instance, LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] had gotten out of the Air Force before me, and he was living in the East Village. We called it the Lower East Side then. That was before it was the East Village.

I got out of the Air Force in June and went to San Francisco in September to attend the San Francisco Art Institute. I was surprised they let me in, because my academic record was pathetic. But then when I got there, I realized they let anybody in. I mean, there were the people there who hadn't even finished high school.

I spent three months in New York before I went to San Francisco. We used to go listen to Thelonious Monk play music, and we'd smoke a little pot on the street and talk and go to poetry readings and stuff like that.

Phillips: If I can just ask a question.

Perkis: Sure.

Phillips: You had not had a great experience in schools up until then, right? So what motivated you to apply to the San Francisco Art Institute? Did you realize you needed more training to do what you wanted to do?

Perkis: At that time I could get $110 a month from the Veterans Administration if I was a full-time college student for as long as it took to get a degree, which you know was four years. That was a decent amount of money

back then. That was a good apartment. That was a *really* good apartment or enough food for a month or two.

So I wanted to go to college. There were very few schools that had photography. These days, photography's being taught everywhere. But back then there were I think four or five colleges that had photography majors. San Francisco was one, Rochester Institute of Technology, Chicago Art Institute, University of Illinois, I think. San Francisco was the capital of the Beat Generation so I was really interested in being there. I considered the Rochester Institute, but they taught technical photography. They taught you to be professional photographer, commercial photographer. San Francisco was an art school that taught photography. Their catalog was about 12 pages, which I really liked. Rather than 240 pages at Rochester Institute.

Phillips: Once you got there, did you stay for four years?

Perkis: I did. Though I interrupted it and went back to Boston for a year. And I got married while I was in Boston and went back and then had a baby, who is now sixty.

Schumacher: Was there cross-germination of thinking and ideas across disciplines, for example, between photography and painting and drawing while you were there?

Perkis: Completely. When I first got there, I thought painting was something I knew nothing about it. I mean, I didn't know much about art. Although I found

out that I did, because the way I thought about photography was very much the way I think about all the arts now. But I got there and it was primarily a painting school, painting and drawing.

It was very hot. It was a very hot school. Diebenkorn was teaching there, and David Park and Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell. I don't know if you know these people.

Phillips: Yes, many of them.

Perkis: Deborah Remington and Joan Brown and Jay DeFeo were. It was really amazing. There was a required painting class. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it. But they kept saying, "You have to. If you want to stay in the school, you have to take a painting class."

And so I did, and I loved it. I actually painted more than I photographed for a couple of years. I'm really grateful because at that time photography—not there, but in the culture—was not thought of as a visual art. It was more journalism. I mean, there were artists who used photography, and we knew them. But it was small, it was like a corner of photography. People like Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz and Minor White. But photography was more about journalism and magazines and books. Photographs were worth nothing. When I first got to the San Francisco Art Institute, you could buy an Edward Weston print for $25, which I didn't do. And now they're over a million.

So photography was just starting to be—I don't know a better word for it—popular. Anyway, I started painting, and I loved it.

I became friendly with a painting teacher, a guy named Ralph Du Casse. I was living with a few other people who were painters. And I learned a lot about painting and about the fact that photography was a visual art, and it fit right in. It was a form of printmaking. Does that answer the question?

Schumacher: Absolutely. Were you aware at the time that photography was, it seems, on the brink of assuming a new role in the art world?

Perkis: No, I wasn't. That didn't really happen until a bit later. Let's see if I can say this. When I started photography, I think I had a fantasy that I would be a kind of photojournalist like Eugene Smith. I would go around the world and take pictures of problems, and then they would be published in magazines, and the problems would get fixed.

I mean, I had that kind of naive thought—not that I ever did it very well, very much. And then—this is a shift. The middle 1950s was a period where Japanese culture started to come into this country. It came into California and San Francisco, and Zen became known in this country. It had not been known before except, I guess, to a very small number of people.

The idea of a spiritual world was starting to be known. There was a book by D. T. Suzuki. I don't know what year it came out, but I remember finding that book and being thrilled by it. And then at a certain point a photographer

whose work I had seen but didn't know much about named Minor White came to the Art Institute and taught a two-week workshop, meeting almost every day and looking at pictures and talking. He was a religious person. A spiritual person. He was involved with all kinds of mystical stuff. He was traveling with a young man named Paul Caponigro, who's still alive and photographing. At the Art Institute, I had a scholarship because of my veteran status (and no other money). So I was put in charge of making sure that Minor White had slide projectors and the room where he was going to lecture had chairs in it and that he had always had a bottle of scotch near him.

We became friends. He was the leading representative, I would say, of the idea of photography as a "spiritual pursuit." It changed me, those two weeks. I started seeing other possibilities in photography.

Minor was only really interested in photographing with a view camera, which is a camera with a bellows and you got under a dark cloth. It's a big negative like this, so it's very sharp. When you use a view camera, you can't take pictures of things that are moving. So it's not very spontaneous. I never went for that, particularly. I tried it and didn't like it. So I never became a disciple of Minor's. But I stayed in touch with him for many years. He ended up getting what I call "guru artist" status, and so I didn't see him in the latter part of his life, but he changed my view of what photography could do.

And then, as I said before, I became interested in, and was also learning a lot about, painting and drawing. Not just doing it but being around people who

did it and going to museums and taking art history classes. And so my intentions in photography shifted, and that's that story.

Phillips: When did you move to New York City?

Philip: 1962.

Phillips: There must have been something about the city that drew you to it.

Perkis: If you wanted to be an artist, you either lived in San Francisco, Chicago, or New York, period, the end. Or a little bit of LA, but not much. It was a very different world. You didn't live just anywhere. And if you lived in New York, it was below 14th Street. Those were the rules.

It was a much smaller world. I don't want to go on about it, but there were no photography galleries, zero. There was a coffee shop on Seventh Avenue South near Bleecker called the Limelight, run by a woman named Helen G. She had a photography gallery in the back of the coffee shop. It was lit by those clamp-on lights you buy at Canal Street for $1.95. You could buy an Atget print for twenty-five bucks.

That's where photographers went and hung out. And that was it. There were no galleries of photography. Photography was not an art for the wall until the late seventies, I think.

Phillips: So San Francisco was one of the places where you could have been an artist. Why did you decide you were done with San Francisco after four years there?

Perkis: I was from Boston, my wife was from Boston, our families were here. And I don't know—I think New York was just where you went. My wife was a painter. You went to New York and lived downtown. That's what you did. It was a very different world because—well, we don't need to go into that too much.

Phillips: You came to live in the city for many years. How did/do you feel about New York?

Perkis: I loved New York City. I just loved it. I loved being here. I mean, I'm talking as though I'm in New York now. That's where you went. That's where you were. It's weird. I think Cyrilla had the same experience. It wasn't that I chose to be in New York. It was where you went. And even when I moved out of New York, I lived near New York. I was always connected to the city.

Now with the vision loss and the structural weakness, I don't feel part of New York anymore, and I don't like going there anymore. New York has changed a lot, and I've changed also. Back then it was Chinese food for a dollar, and coffee shops where you met people and hung out and talked, and some painting galleries.

I remember when I first came to New York, we had a one-room apartment, the three of us [Philip, his first wife, and his daughter]. My friend Arthur Freed had a dark room in a storefront, one of those storefronts on Third Street where you walked down to get into it so there was no light. He had built a darkroom there and invited me to share the rent and use it. That was my first darkroom in New York.

Phillips: It was the center of the universe for artists back then.

Perkis: Yeah. I remember once—it was kind of a joke that I hadn't been above 14th Street for a number of months.

Schumacher: How would you describe what happened above 14th Street? How was it different?

Perkis: That was capitalism.

Phillips: I'd like to transition to asking some questions about your becoming a photographer and becoming a photographer in New York. After you finished your training and moved to New York, what were some of your early successes and highlights? What was your life like in New York when you moved there? You were a young photographer with a young family.

Perkis: Survival. Getting enough money to live. I knew some people, and I had references to some people. So I quickly had a circle of friends on the Lower East Side, in the Village. A lot of artists were working as what were called

"welfare investigators." You would work for the city, and you got health insurance and a decent salary. You would go around and interview people on welfare. And the secret of it was that you could cheat on the time, so you could make a living without putting in much time.

I applied for that job and I got it. But, no, that wasn't the first job. The first job was working in a darkroom of a place that made pictures for actors and musicians, one hundred 8×10 glossies. I worked making eight by ten glossies eight hours a day in Midtown. And then I was going to start that welfare job, but [before I did] I got a job printing for a fashion photographer.

There was a whole culture of mostly men, but some women, who worked as assistants to commercial photographers. And a lot of the successful commercial photographers, the big-deal ones, had five or six or seven assistants. People in the darkroom printing, people developing film, people setting up lighting, people loading the cameras while they were shooting, stuff like that. I got into that world rather quickly. It paid $25 a day, which was enough for three of us to live on.

And then I became a studio manager for a photographer, and [my pay] went up to $40 a day, which was very good money. Being the manager meant that I was in charge of scheduling and making sure there were materials and that the cameras were in good shape and booking models and all that stuff. That's what a lot of us did—we worked for commercial photographers.

Every once in a while one of us would pick up a job for a magazine, and that was really good to do that. There were a lot of small magazines like *Coronet*. I don't know if you ever heard of just little magazines like this, *Reader's Digest*–size? You'd do picture stories, a day in the life of somebody or something like that. I did a little bit of that. I wasn't very successful at it.

Phillips: When did you start teaching?

Perkis: In 1964, so I had been in the city two years, two and a half years. My friend Arthur Freed was offered a teaching fellowship at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. It was a boy's prep school for rich people, like George Bush went there and et cetera. Anyway, the deal was you lived there, they gave you housing and some food and $5,000, which was a good amount of money at the time. Arthur Freed had that fellowship, and then his wife announced she was leaving, so he had to turn it down, and I got it. My wife and daughter and I lived in Andover for a year, and I taught. That was the first teaching I did.

Phillips: What did you teach?

Perkis: Photography. I'm still really good friends with one of the students that I had there, who's a psychiatrist. He's still at Harvard. We've been friends all these years.

[When I finished the year at Andover], I moved back to the city and did commercial photography for about three or four years. And then I started teaching at Pratt and et cetera.

Phillips: Often in the art world, working commercially and working artistically are seen as being completely different pursuits, even diametrically opposed to one another. Did doing commercial photography help you in any way as someone who was also using photography as an art?

Perkis: Oh, that's a question. I became more facile. I learned a lot of technology, which the San Francisco Art Institute was very lax about technology. I mean, if you go to Rochester Institute, you learn color and you learn large format cameras and you learn all this technical stuff. Because there's a lot of technical stuff in photography, which I knew very little about. So doing commercial work and working for other photographers was educational.

Also, because printing commercial work is not easy, I became a very good printer. So I learned a lot, but not aesthetics. I did a lot of commercial photography, but I always kept it completely separate from my own work. I was lucky to be able to do that because people who didn't do that kind of got lost, a lot of them.

Phillips: In those early years when you were doing commercial work and had a family to support, were you able to go out with your camera and take pictures?

Perkis: Yeah, I always did. Sometimes not a lot, but I always kept it going. I was always making some pictures for myself.

Phillips: At what point did you have a first show or an experience where your own work became the center of what was happening?

Perkis: I don't know when I had my first solo show. But I remember one show on East Fifth Street. There was a gallery called the Underground Gallery, and I think it was a show with five of us. We just all came and put up our own work and fought over space.

Really, showing was not a thing. Photography's very funny because it wasn't thought of as something to put on the wall until the late seventies, early eighties. Photographs weren't worth money. It all changed in the 1980s, and photography became one of the visual arts.

When I went to Pratt to teach, before my friend Arthur got a job there, the head of the photography department was a fellow who learned photography in the army during World War II and then got a job at Pratt to be the school photographer. He wasn't interested in photography as an art. It was just a technical thing that you could do. He had a big darkroom, and he took pictures, portraits of students, pictures of people giving checks to the administration. He started getting paid by faculty to photograph their art for them. And then he started photographing students' art for money. He had a pretty good business going.

The students would come to him and ask him to teach them how to do it. That became a photography class. And that was how the photography department at Pratt got started. A photographer named Ralph Hattersley got a job teaching there, very briefly because the head of the department considered it a mistake. And Hattersley got Arthur Freed a job teaching there, and Arthur got me a job teaching there. And that changed the whole thing.

The guy who was the chair, that original guy who was the school photographer, he actually said to me one day: "I don't really like photography at all, I just do it." And he was the chair of the department and the only one teaching people getting masters degrees. Teaching photography and getting an MFA in photography became a major industry in the 1970s and '80s. And now it's going downhill again because of the digital thing. You don't need to study it. But I'm way off the subject now.

Phillips: It's interesting to learn how much photography changed in the seventies and eighties, both in art schools and in the art world at large. It seems you came into the field at a time when it was really changing a lot.

Perkis: Well, it's interesting because—this is no longer biographical at all—but if you look at the history of photography, the first photographs were made in 1839, and the medium never stopped changing until now, and it's still changing every week. It was always changing, and it was always in transition. And it was always "What's art?" and "Is photography art?" That was a burning question when I started.

Minor White, the guy I talked about who I helped in San Francisco, he was asked that question in a huge lecture hall: "Is photography an art?" He said, "Certainly not. It's cameras and film and enlargers and chemicals. Why don't you ask me if painting is an art?" And then, "Okay, painting's not an art. It's just paint and canvas and brushes and stuff like that. If an artist uses them, they can make art with them." I think that's a really interesting way to look at all these mediums.

END OF PART 1

Session 2: Recorded April 14, 2023

Phillips: I wanted to ask a couple of follow-up questions from the first oral history. You had mentioned that your father was very successful and very prosperous, and I wondered what he did, what was his profession?

Perkis: He was not very prosperous. He achieved middle class. My father was an immigrant from Ukraine. He was actually illegal, and he became very successful. He went to pharmacy school. That was only eight years after he arrived here, penniless and not speaking English. He got a degree in pharmacy, and his timing was terrible because he got his degree just as the stock market crashed in 1929. So he couldn't practice pharmacy because they were all going out of business. And so he started selling groceries because he figured out that people have to eat even when the economy is terrible. He

started as a salesman and he ended up having his own firm and being fairly successful so that we were completely middle class.

We had a single-family house and an Oldsmobile. When I did badly in school, I was sent away to a special prep school and stuff like that. I had braces on my teeth and so did my sister, and she had a nose reduction job. We were complete middle-class, suburban people. That's a huge accomplishment for the fact that he came penniless without the language, and he accomplished all that in about twenty years.

He was a bitter, angry person also.

Phillips: How did that bitterness and anger come out?

Perkis: Well, he wasn't a nice guy. I would like to leave it at that.

Phillips: And was your mother a stay-at-home wife and mother or did she work?

Perkis: She never worked. She took care of the house and cooked, and she was very cold and fairly bitter about her life. She was very good-looking, but she was a very cold person. She was quite intelligent too.

Phillips: How did they react when you decided to become an artist?

Perkis: Badly. I think we've gone through this, but I did poorly in school, and when I was fifty I met Cyrilla's mother, who was a learning-disability specialist, and she diagnosed the fact that I'm dyslexic, and that was the first I knew of it. I knew I had a different kind of brain, but [Cyrilla's mother] was very specific. She asked me a few questions, and she knew exactly what that was about. So I couldn't really do school and stuff like that. But I did have visual abilities and unusually good vision, which I miss very much. And so it was a natural thing that I would gravitate toward a visual field. Once I started, there was no question about it, that's what I wanted to do. I did photography almost every day for sixty-five years until I got stopped by my vision loss.

Phillips: When we finished up last time we were talking about your life in the city. We had started talking about teaching a little bit. You were in the city for a while, but then you moved to upstate New York before then moving back to New York City again eventually. How did moving to upstate New York come about? I think you first lived in Warwick, is that right?

Perkis: Well, we moved to another place first but that's not worth talking about. And then we lived in Warwick. I was married to my first wife, and my daughter, Rachel, was very young at the time. She's now sixty-one years old. We moved out of the city for a couple of reasons. One was that we lived on Ninth Avenue. We had a nice apartment on Ninth Avenue, which was at that time a major truck route. This was in the 1960s. That's when they first started coming up with the idea of lead being bad for you. And we realized that our daughter, who was young, was being subjected to the exhausts from five hundred trucks a day going down Ninth Avenue. We had her tested, and the

test came back, “She’s still below the danger line.” We looked at each other and said, “Ooh.”

There was also a spiritual group that is in Warwick, and we were active in that so we moved up there. We stayed for ten years in Warwick. And then we moved back to Brooklyn. I commuted to Pratt during those ten years that we lived in Warwick. I would drive in and sleep on people’s couches, which was okay.

Phillips: I know the city was always important to you, so it must’ve been nice to have kept up a connection to it.

Perkis: It was okay. It was very strenuous, but I was younger, and I was healthy, and I was very alive. I was building a house in Warwick. I was doing stuff all the time and photographing. It was a rich period.

Phillips: You’ve traveled a great deal. What drew you to travel? Can you talk about some of the places you’ve been? I know there’s Mexico, but many other places in addition. Has the world always been of interest to you?

Perkis: I’ve had a lot of opportunities to travel. It’s interesting: I go where I’m invited, almost exclusively. The first time I went to Korea was with Cyrilla, and it was to give a series of lectures. My teaching book, the teaching photography book, was translated into Korean by a very close friend, and it became a successful book in Korea in photography. I was invited to give a series of lectures there, so that was a free trip to Korea. And in Italy I taught at this

school that's run by a former student of mine. I taught in Israel, too, and that took me to Egypt because they're very close in proximity. So mostly I've been invited to places. In Mexico I was invited to give lectures and stuff like that. And then I got a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1992, I think, and my project was to photograph in Mexico, so in a way I was on an assignment. I went to Mexico a lot for about three or four years.

Phillips: Do you apply for Guggenheims?

Perkis: I applied for twenty years and I finally got it. And Cyrilla got it three years ago. So we both have had Guggenheims. Thirty years apart. It's very prestigious. It's probably the highest honor that an artist gets in terms of foundation grants and stuff like that.

It gives you a year to not worry about money as much.

Phillips: You applied with the idea of going to Mexico to take pictures?

Perkis: Right. I said, "That's my project."

Phillips: Why of all the places did you want to go to Mexico?

Perkis: You've put your thumb on the mystery. I have no idea. I love Mexico. I love Mexicans. I love being there. I'm attracted to it visually and in every other way. And I have no idea why. I'm a first-generation immigrant from Eastern Europe. I don't speak Spanish. I don't know Mexico. It's a madness for me. And

I don't know why. I wish I could keep going [there]. I just love Mexico. I am not particularly interested in going to Europe. I've been there several times, and it doesn't do it for me. But Mexico is just . . . it's mysterious and it's a little frightening and it's surreal. I don't know, I can't really define it. But it's almost like I was Mexican in my past life, if you want to go in that kind of place, which I don't. But there's something wonderful about it.

Phillips: Your last visit to the country was when?

Perkis: I was there in . . . I guess the middle nineties was the last time I was there.

Phillips: How has being a traveler and being a photographer overlapped in your life beyond Mexico and getting the Guggenheim and taking that series of photos? Would you travel to take photographs? Would you take photographs when you traveled?

Perkis: That's a difficult question. I photograph wherever I am. And I'd say the majority of my photographs are done near where I lived, wherever I was living. If I was living in New York, I photographed on the streets of New York constantly. When I lived in Warwick, I did a lot of landscapes and portraits of friends there and stuff. And then I would be invited to places. And I think the only trip I ever took on my own to photograph was to Ireland. And I wasn't very successful. I was there for four or five weeks.

I didn't make very many good pictures. It was a very interesting trip. I talked to a lot of people. I like Irish writing and poetry and that spirit. I grew up in Boston, and there's a lot of Irish there. It's kind of an Irish city. That's maybe the only trip I ever took that was specifically to take pictures, and nobody would sponsor it and I didn't know anyone.

Phillips: Did you go there with some preconceived notion of what you were going to be able to capture in Ireland?

Perkis: Well, I didn't know what I would see. And what I saw was incredibly beautiful. I don't know if you've been there? It's one of the most beautiful physical countries I've ever been in, but I just didn't take very good pictures there. Figure that out.

Phillips: What do you make of that?

Perkis: I have no idea. But you have to keep in mind that the vast majority of pictures I take are no good.

Phillips: In what sense are they no good? What do you mean they're no good?

Perkis: They're not good pictures. They're boring or they're stupid or they're technically no good. I would develop sixteen rolls at a time, and each roll has thirty-six pictures on it, so I don't know what that is. That's a lot. And if I would get ten good pictures out of that, or even five, that would be a big success. Most of the pictures are not successful. There was a wonderful

photographer, a Hungarian guy named [Andre] Kertesz, and he said about people like me who take a lot of pictures, "Even a blind chicken gets some grain." There are people who are even lower percentage than I am. They just click constantly. But that's the nature of photography with a small camera.

Phillips: Would you say some photographers shoot a lot, understanding that only some of those pictures are going to be worth developing? And then other photographers who take very few actual pictures?

Perkis: Yes, there's a huge range of people in photography and how they work. And I don't know what's going on now with the digital thing, but I suspect it's probably even more so because you're not even using anything up when you take a digital picture.

Phillips: You would shoot a lot knowing that only a small percentage of those shots would be something you would ultimately develop. So would you develop the contact sheets and scan them and then choose based on that?

Perkis: I didn't make contact sheets for the last forty or fifty years. I just looked at negatives. An interesting thing is that when you look at the negatives . . . I have a light table downstairs, I think you saw it. It's a box with light underneath, and you sit with a loupe, a magnifier, and you look at the negatives like that, and you see the abstraction in the tone more than the subject. And so my emphasis in choosing . . . and then for years what I did is I would look through the negatives and when I saw one that was interesting, I would make a proof print on small, cheap paper.

But the last ten years I got really strange and went right from the negative to the sixteen- by eighteen-inch prints. It was sort of like increasing the risk in a way. But I got very good at looking at negatives. The only place where it doesn't work is you don't really see facial expression in a negative. You could do a portrait of someone and then be surprised that the facial expression isn't appropriate or is.

Schumacher: Would you say then that in a way, abstraction and tone are your subject, if understood in that way?

Perkis: Yes, very much. I have no interest in making a photograph that's not interesting as an abstraction and tonally. And I take tone to be a big word in the fact that there's the tone, the gray tone, and then there's emotional tone, and they're not separate. And it's the tone—it kind of has a musical reference in a way—that I'm most interested in. I don't know if you've noticed—I'm sure you have—I don't care what I take pictures of. It can be cities, a city street or a portrait of someone I know or a landscape or out the window. I don't care what I photograph. And one of the reasons I'm not more popular is that people don't really understand that or like that. They like a photographer with a theme. I've been told that by a lot of curators and dealers. "What do you photograph?" And I say, "I don't care. I'll photograph anything." I have a beautiful set of pictures of Cyrilla. Does that answer your question?

Schumacher: It does. It's an interesting question, I think, and it helps understand your work too.

Perkis: I have no interest in a [particular] subject. It doesn't matter to me what I'm taking a picture of. And this last project I did, which was my final effort, which you've looked through, is mostly right around the house. At this little park in Stony Point that we went to a lot. It's like the white on the wall. The guy plowed the driveway, I would look out the window. Wow. I don't care. I don't think that's the . . . well, maybe that's enough said.

Phillips: Tell me about some of the photographs that you've seen in your life that have moved you and that you can't forget.

Perkis: Photographs by other photographers?

Phillips: Yes, by other photographers.

Perkis: You mean, whose shoulders am I standing on?

Phillips: Yes.

Perkis: Well, certainly Stieglitz. And Timothy O'Sullivan is a big influence on me. He was a 19th-century documentary photographer. Julia Margaret Cameron a little bit. She was a pictorialist. Wonderful photographer, late 19th century.

Phillips: I don't know O'Sullivan's work. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and what it is about his work that you like so much?

Perkis: He was a documentary photographer, and he worked for Matthew Brady documenting the Civil War and other things. And then he photographed the exploration of the West. He was there to collect facts and show people what it was like so that they could . . . it was evidence. His job was to produce evidence of the beauty and strangeness and interestingness of the western United States, which was just being opened up. And then there's this incredible spiritual poetic thing behind all his pictures that gives me the chills. I think he's an incredibly good photographer. I think there was something going on with him, and he was not an intellectual. He died very young. I don't know if that helps?

Phillips: Yes, it does.

Perkis: Of course, I'm very influenced by Stieglitz. I'm very influenced by Robert Frank.

Phillips: You said his book *The Americans* came out early in your [career].

Perkis: In the late fifties. And then I became somewhat friends with him. Not close, but I was with him many times.

Phillips: How did that happen? When did you meet him?

Perkis: Well, when I started photography in 1957, '58, everybody knew all the photographers, it wasn't like it is now. Photographers weren't celebrities. It

wasn't like there were famous people and then you had to talk to their secretaries, it wasn't like that at all. There was a coffee shop on Seventh Avenue called the Limelight [run by] Helen Gee. There was a little gallery in the back . . . [it was lit by] those clip-on lights that you bought for $1.50 on Canal Street. There was always a little show there. Photographers would go there and sit and talk and stuff like that.

And then being a photographer, I printed for Dorothea Lange when I was a student because she hired students to print for her. And now she's a mythic icon, but she was just a good photographer back then. Ansel Adams was a teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute where I went to school. He was a jerk. Nobody went to his classes. We thought he was a fool. And now he's like the world's famous . . . When we came to see this house [before we bought it]—it was a family home—there were no pictures on the wall and there were no books, but there was one poster, and it was an Ansel Adams poster. That was the only visual thing in the whole house.

Phillips: And that's how you knew it was the house was for you!

Perkis: It was very amusing.

Phillips: Did you just meet Robert Frank at the Limelight or something then?

Perkis: I forget how I first met him.

He wasn't a celebrity then, but he ended up being a big celebrity. When I started photography, photographs weren't worth any money. Which, welcome to America, that was a big part of it. Photography became an art in the 1980s. I'm talking a lot and I'm making huge generalizations because people could argue about what I'm saying. But generally that's true. There were no galleries devoted to photography when I came to New York in 1962.

Phillips: It's almost like you're saying not so much that photography became an art then maybe but that it became a commodity?

Perkis: Right, it became a commodity. When I went to school to study photography, I think there were four places in the United States that taught photography on the college level. Now there are four thousand.

Schumacher: In a way, you were a part of the emergence of this new art form. What do you think was happening that made photography more understood in that way by the general population?

Perkis: I'm not sure. I don't really know. Maybe to some degree the demise of the magazines because of television. *Life Magazine* was where every photographer wanted to work. Journalism, photojournalism, that was what you wanted to do. I had that fantasy, too, when I first started out. There was *Life* and *Look* and *Coronet* and the *New York Times Magazine* and stuff like that. Photographers wanted to work for them. Photographs weren't thought of as framed and belonging on the wall unless it was a picture of your grandfather. People didn't look at photographs as art.

But I'm not sure . . . [other] people would be able to speak to this issue with a lot more knowledge than I have. Somehow in the 1980s photography became an art, became recognized as an art. I hate to use this example, but I think it's the clearest. When I got to San Francisco in 1958, Edward Weston had died not that long ago, and his son was selling his prints for $25. If you want to buy an Edward Weston print now it'll be more than a million for the same picture, so that's what happened. And I didn't buy any.

Schumacher: I wonder if it didn't start to come to be understood differently because of efforts by photographers like yourself who were taking it seriously and presenting it in that way. As something worth taking a closer look at and understanding differently.

Perkis: The Museum of Modern Art changed and started promoting photography in a bigger way. They started teaching photography in more and more institutions. You could major in photography in college, and people started collecting photographs. I don't know what else to say about this question. It's a shift in the culture.

Now it's changing again because of the digital stuff. Everything's always changing, so that's part of it. Charles Olson says beautifully, "What does not change is the will to change."

Phillips: That's beautiful.

One last question that's more biographical in nature . . . Cyrilla has been a huge part of your life, and we haven't really talked about when you and Cyrilla met. It seems that you are not only partners but also collaborators and supporters of one another's artwork over the years. Can you talk a little bit about meeting Cyrilla and how important that's been to you as a photographer and artist?

Perkis: Cyrilla was a student at Pratt, and I didn't know her. I was teaching there and didn't know her, but she did photography and liked my pictures. Is Cyrilla here?

Cyrilla: Yeah.

Perkis: She liked my pictures. And then there was an opening for an administrator in the fine art department, and the head of the department, who I was quite friendly with—we were kind of friends—he asked me to be the other member of the committee to choose the person to have that job. That's what you do when you're full-time faculty. We interviewed, I don't know, five or six people. One of them was Cyrilla. And she was by far the most impressive candidate. She got hired, and we became friendly. I was still married, barely, at the time. My daughter was grown and gone. Cyrilla and I became friends, and I really respected her as an artist. She liked my pictures. We liked each other. And then we fell in love and became partners. We've been together around thirty-five years, something like that. We're very close. There's a new book here for you [that we collaborated on, *ar*].

Phillips: You've collaborated on two books? A new one just was published. *Octave* was the first one. One of the aspects of that book is that it's a dialogue between your two artistic visions. Can you talk about that? Because it really shows how similar and different your visions are at the same time.

Perkis: Well, it's interesting because our work has absolutely nothing in common physically. She's a drawer and a sculptor and I'm a photographer, so our work is not similar at all. But what's behind it, I think, is very similar. I don't know how to describe that similarity easily, but we're both after something that . . . we're both on a search in our lives, and we're searching together. And we seem to have a karmic connection in that way. Even though our work doesn't look alike at all, I think that it's similar in the sense of its quest.

There's a thing in that movie [*Seeing: A Mystery*] that I'm sure you've looked at where I talk about swimming in the mystery. I love being in the mystery. I don't know if I say it in the movie, but I say it all the time: a real mystery has no solution. It's not a puzzle. It's not like the thin man knows who did it. Life is a mystery. And Cyrilla and I share that [feeling] very, very deeply. We're very lucky that we have each other, that we found each other. But we also work at it, so it's not all automatic. I don't want to say more than that right now. Was that enough to say?

Phillips: [to Cyrilla] Did you have anything to add to that?

Mozenter: I think Philip spoke to it very well. I would say when I was an undergraduate student, I saw some of Philip's pictures in a faculty show, and I was knocked out by them. I was deeply moved by the atmosphere. Though I wouldn't have used that word at the time; I didn't use any words.

[Break for lunch]

Phillips: I'll re-ask the question that I asked a few minutes ago at the table about how, having come from this background of bitterness and anger, you have ended up such a broad, generous person who seems to really be rooting your life in a culture of love and care?

Perkis: That's an impossible question. There's a Johnny Cash song called "A Boy Named Sue." Johnny Cash is singing the song and it's [about] how his father named him Sue when he was born, and he hated his father for it and he wanted to beat him up, he wanted to kill him. Everybody picked on him for being called Sue, he had to fight all the time. He finally met his father and was going to beat him up, and his father said, "What do you mean? I made you a man because you had to fight all the time to protect yourself because I named you Sue, which made your life difficult. So you became a real fighter and now you're a real man." So in a way . . . I don't know how far you want to go with this thing, but there's a philosopher, Arnold Toynbee, I don't know if you know.

Phillips: He's a historian too, I believe.

Perkis: Right, right. I don't know much about him, but apparently one of his theories—and it's kind of racist, because he was northern European, British, I think—and it is that cultures accomplish a lot when there's enough difficulty but not too much. He talks about how people in the southern islands where there's food on the trees, they don't develop a very sophisticated culture because it's too easy. Then people who live in the North Pole who have to spend all their lives just surviving, just getting food, just staying warm, they don't have a very rich culture either. It's people in the middle who have enough difficulties, but not too much, who develop the most sophisticated cultures.

His theory is that that's been moving north. It used to be more in the Mediterranean area that culture was flourishing, in Egypt and so forth, but now it's more northern Europe. It's very Eurocentric idea of what culture is, but it's about how much difficulty is required in order to grow. So that's one way to look at a lot of people, and I don't want to go too far into it, but I have my issues, I'm not as good as you said I was. [Laughter.] I have had an extremely interesting, rich life and with very few regrets. So I'm very lucky.

It's also interesting that people grow up in the same family and are totally different from each other. I'm a very different person than my sister. I really care for her, but she's totally different than I am. Psychologically, intellectually, creatively, we're almost opposites. Cyrilla is completely the opposite of her brother. So how does that happen? I don't know how you are with your siblings, but that happens a lot.

My parents had some very, very good qualities also. My father had a very good eye for space, and he was a really good gardener. I may have gotten some[thing] from him in that way. And my mother was an impeccable dresser.

Phillips: We keep coming back in our conversation to this idea of mystery. There are so many mysteries that we're living with, and it seems almost like your work and your thinking about your work and life is . . . It seems to me that sometimes you're eliciting mysteries, that's one of the things that's driving you. You're calling forth the mysteries.

Perkis: That's what keeps me going is not knowing. Somebody once said, "As soon as you know the single reason for anything, you know you're wrong." I think that's pretty smart.

Phillips: Some people, when they're faced with something they don't know, look for the answer or the solution. I get the feeling that that's not what you're doing when you're faced with something you don't know. What is it that you do when you're faced with something you don't know?

Perkis: I could say—and I hope it doesn't sound too clever—I want to swim in it. I want to swim in the mystery. Because there's no answers. I mean, who can figure this thing out? We kill each other? We kill each other? What's that? My God. And then there's a guy named Albers who paints squares, and you can stand in front of them and have a transcendent experience, or a simple bowl made in Korea a thousand years ago, and you can just stand in front of it and it's transcendent. You can't figure that out, and it's stupid to try. All you can do

is have a sense of wonder about it. I'm preaching now, I don't want to do that.

Phillips: I don't think you're preaching. We'll let you know if you start to preach.

[This is a repeat of something we discussed at lunch], but I just want to be sure that we get it on camera because I think it's important—the idea of correspondence. As I understand it, that's a term you use to explain the concept of a photo being about the relationship between what's inside a person and what's outside. Are you the one who started to call it *correspondence*?

Perkis: I think so, but maybe I'm not, because I might have heard it somewhere. I'm right now listening to Walt Whitman. I'm a huge Walt Whitman fan as of two weeks ago. He said, "Do I contradict myself? Of course I contradict myself; I contain worlds." If there's a world inside of me and there's a world inside of you and there's a world inside of everybody, and then you are out or in the house or whatever and then something strikes you, what is *that*? It's a correspondence between what's inside and what's outside. It's a meeting. It's falling in love in a way, or fear, or whatever.

It's that correspondence that I think, why does one photographer take this kind of picture and another photographer take a completely different kind of picture? What is it? Why does Ernest Hemingway write the way he does and Gertrude Stein the way she does? They're both alive at the same time in the same culture. What's that about? I don't know what else to say about that, but

it's a beautiful thing to think about. Maybe I'd say one more thing, but it's tricky. There's a phrase in—I don't know what discipline it is—and we used to say this phrase when we were kids to show off how smart we were. "Ontogeny recapitulates by phylogeny." Do you know it?

It's "the lifecycle of the individual matches the lifecycle of the species." What I go through as an individual is also what the human species goes through, and everybody else also. It seems that when an embryo is first starting to form it has gills because it goes through the stages of that development. It's a different way to look at yourself, to see yourself, that this war, let's just pick one, the war in Ukraine is also in me. If I pay attention, I think I'm right, I want to stop that other person who's wrong, they have something that's mine, it's exactly the same. But I don't have missiles. So how do people justify war? How does the human race justify what's going on in so many places? How do we do that? If I really look at myself, I see that it's all in me. Now I'm preaching and I'm going to shut up.

Phillips: There can be an air of melancholy in your photos.

Perkis: Yes.

Phillips: You called your 2008 book *The Sadness of Men.* It's a retrospective. Can you talk about sadness and its place in your work? Do you see sadness and melancholy; are those the same things?

Perkis: I see sadness as a positive emotion, as something to cherish, as something to seek. I see depression as bad. Depression is repressed anger, and I think we confuse the two a lot. Sadness can be very loving and very tender and very thoughtful. The condition of our lives is sadness. I think if we accepted it more, we would have better lives. If we accepted the fact that we do get sick and we do die and we do get separated and we do have difficulties, and maybe it's all good. Maybe sadness is not a negative thing. So I named it that. I just wanted to . . . I got quite a bit of criticism for it, but I'm still glad I did it.

Phillips: Who criticized you for it?

Perkis: Oh, friends and people. "That's a bad title." Then I got a little "I'm a sexist because it's men rather than mankind or humans or something." But that's all I can say about it.

Phillips: For what it's worth, I like the title. I'm glad you stood by it as a title.

Schumacher: I like the title too, I love the title. It's interesting what a title, not to digress, but feel free to comment on this if you'd like, a title of course guides someone, it influences how they begin to apprehend something or the framework or the lens through which they might look at it. It's like the paradox of saying, "Try not to think of a pink elephant." The very first thing you do is you think of a pink elephant, even if you don't want to. If you're prompting someone with a title of that sort, you're really demanding of them to look at it in a certain way.

Phillips: Let's move on to your book *Teaching Photography* because, as we were talking about it at the table, that seems like such a core text to who you are as a photographer and as a person. The ideas you came to in it are really ideas that you developed over your lifetime through a lot of experience. When did you start writing that book, and what compelled you to write it?

Perkis: It's a little bit of a story. I quit my full-time tenure full professor blah-blah-blah job at Pratt when I turned sixty-five. I kept teaching part-time at Pratt and part-time at the School of Visual Arts and part-time at NYU, but I thought, I was sixty-five . . .

Well, let's go back a little, because when I started teaching it was a new field. There was no guidance on how to teach photography at the college level, so we had to invent what we were doing. Everybody had different ideas, including me. Then I was chairman of photography at Pratt for quite a few years, and I worked on curriculum development and stuff like that, so I was interested in whether you can teach somebody that, and does it belong in an art school, and what's the relationship of photography to the other visual arts? All these questions that came up, I thought about them quite a lot and took notes when I was teaching. [At the same time] I would hire people to teach and then help them develop their ideas. So when I stopped, I just started writing things in a notebook. I didn't think of making a book to publish.

Cyrilla—I don't write well, I write well but I can't spell at all and my handwriting is, to put it mildly, eccentric—Cyrilla can read my handwriting

and likes it, and so she typed up some of my writing on white paper so it was legible, and then my friend Owen, who taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology, was visiting, and I showed him some of it. He said, "Oh, great. Let's do a book."

I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I can publish a book up there, it's no problem." So I did it. We published a book at Rochester Institute of Technology. They paid for the whole thing, and I think the first edition was three hundred copies. The school kept 150, and I got 150, and we sold them by mail to people we knew. People liked it. Then Taehee [Park], who was a dear friend and is our publisher in Korea, she saw it and said, "May I translate it into Korean?" I said, "Sure." She did, and it became a very popular book in Korea. She has sold thousands of copies. It's actually supported her publishing company for years. I just did it, I don't know. I never wrote anything much before.

Phillips: [The book] reminds me of poetry because it's so spare, but it has such a huge amount of content in those spare number of pages. It's only seventy-eight pages or so, right? It's pretty short. But it's like every word and every page is conveying some important piece of information.

Perkis: I don't know what to say about that except—this might sound like false modesty—but I like the book, I think it's good. I'm not capable of writing correctly. I don't know how. So that has become an advantage as I've gotten older. It was tough when I was a kid, because I really don't know how to write correct English.

Phillips: How has that become an advantage?

Perkis: I'm free. I'm free of a rigid form.

Mozenter: Can I add something? There's a couple of things that came into my mind. The first is that the *Teaching Photography* book was a required text in a poetry class at Vassar in recent years, so you're not the only one who has made that connection. That same person whose poetry class it was wrote a blurb for our most recent book, and he described Philip's writing, as, he wrote, "Philip's gracile utterances." *Gracile*. We had to look it up, and it means "slender."

Phillips: *Slender*. Interesting.

Mozenter: Which I thought was really funny. Also, if it's okay for me to mention, when you were in the Air Force and you developed this friendship with Leroi Jones, he introduced you to all kinds of literature. You were friends for a lot of reasons, but one of them was the jazz connection, appreciation of jazz, which has everything to do with improvisation and not following . . . I mean improvisation is the opposite of stanzas in poetry, like following a form. So at the same period of time that you [Philip] were introduced to photography, you were introduced to literature, in that nonacademic way.

Phillips: You talk a lot about form and content in the book *Teaching Photography*. Can you elaborate on the suggestion that form and content are

simultaneous and that there's no difference between them? Give me an example of what you mean.

Perkis: Well, I think Brian would agree with me here, as a visual artist and teacher of visual art, if you can separate the form from the content, it's not a very good picture. They have to be there together. If you look at Salvador Dali—I don't know if you'll agree with the people I name—or Norman Rockwell or Andrew Wyeth, the form is always exactly the same, and then the content, the subject matter, shifts to keep you interested. If you look at an Agnes Martin or a Rothko, or who's the portraitist that we love [to Cyrilla]?

Mozenter: Vermeer?

Perkis: Well, Vermeer certainly, but the recent, the woman.

Mozenter: Alice Neel?

Perkis: Alice Neel, you can't separate the form from the content, it's impossible. They're so intertwined, and that's a way to define good art: "Can you separate the form from the content?" If you can, it's maybe not that great.

Phillips: That's interesting that you bring up Rockwell and Dali in particular.

Perkis: I would say their work is excellent, but they're not artists. I don't know what you'd call it. In Rockwell's case, it was commercial illustration. He

was very good at it, there's no question about it, but he was serving the *Life Magazine* purpose.

Schumacher: At their best, maybe, they're storytellers.

Perkis: Yeah.

But the form and content, when you see an Alice Neel portrait or a Rothko painting or a Stieglitz photograph, you can't pull them apart. You can't, it's impossible. Where does the form start and the content start? There's no way to do that. Or if you look at a Korean jar, a Korean ceramic from the 12th century, it's just a jar and it's just *filled* with the meaning of life. It's just all there. You don't know where it is. That's the mystery.

Phillips: It strikes me when you're talking that you've said, "The sign of good art is this inability to take apart form and content, that they're so inextricable." Maybe that's what art is, a structure of expression in which form and content are dependent on one another to create its message or its presence.

Perkis: I was very close friends with a very great photographer. She was quite a bit older than me, and she was not highly educated in art. She was just a genius photographer, one of the best that ever lived. I was with her once at her apartment, I went there a lot, I printed for her for years and we were very close friends, and I was all excited because Duchamp's snow shovel had just been put up at the Modern. I said, "Helen, the snow shovel's up at the Modern, Duchamp's snow shovel, it's a masterpiece." She looked at me, because she

was not a big sophisticate, she didn't speak about art in a fancy way. She's in her late 80s at this point, and she goes, "What the fuck is good about that? Why that snow shovel?"

I didn't know what to say exactly, and I said, "Because it couldn't have been any other snow shovel in the world." She lit up. Because that's the secret. That's the form/content thing. It's the only snow shovel that would have done, that could have been there; it couldn't have been any other snow shovel. Right around that time there's a guy who wrote art criticism for the *Nation*, which I used to read every week, Arthur Danto, I don't know if you know him.

Phillips: I don't.

Perkis: He said, "We live in an age where anything can be art, but not everything can be art." That's part of it, too. In other words, you can make art out of anything, but not out of everything. It has to be that snow shovel. Anyway, now I'm lecturing. I'm going to shut up.

Phillips: Please don't do that. Do you still feel that photography provides a window through which we can see things we fear or do not want to have contact with directly?

Perkis: There's always been that in photography, all the way back to the mid–19th century when it was new. Everybody still wants to look at Larry Clark's teenagers having sex, but they wouldn't want to be in the room with them. They'd be afraid to, because the kids have guns and drugs and needles and

stuff like that. So photography has always provided that voyeuristic kind of thing, and then of course movies, pornography, and violence and stuff like that. I remember—I'm not good at dates and stuff—a photographer named Nadar who was quite interesting, and he was around very shortly after the invention of photography. He was taking pictures of people who were insane and their facial expressions, that kind of stuff. It really had a voyeuristic quality about it.

It continues. Mapplethorpe, Larry Clark, Diane Arbus, it keeps going. I guess on the internet it's all over the place now. There's always been a little flavor of creepiness about photography, sneaking up on people, taking pictures of people with a telephoto lens, surveillance. Now they have cameras set up all over the place, you're being photographed all the time when you're in public. That's about all I can say about that.

Phillips: It makes me wonder, do you feel like that historical side of photography, that voyeuristic side of it, does its presence as part of photography make photography as an art more complete, more expressive of the total human experience? Or do you feel like it's just an unfortunate fact that in addition to doing all of the beautiful things photography does, it also has this voyeuristic side?

Perkis: It's probably because if you make drawings of those things, it's not the same. Right from the very beginning, people thought photography was true, that a photograph was the truth, that it was actually what was going on. It's

not true, but it has that feeling about it. I talk about the two couples on the bench in the book, do you remember that?

This is before Photoshop. There's a park bench, and there are two couples, man, woman, man, woman. The two couples don't know each other, they just happen to be sharing this big bench. [Each respective couple] loves each other, and they're looking at each other longingly with lowered eyes. Along comes the photographer. He takes a picture of the two inside people, facing away from each other. They call the picture *Alienation*, and everybody believes it, [even though] it's a complete lie based only on the fact that the camera frames.

So, photography's a lie in that case, and it's before Photoshop. Now with Photoshop you can do anything, you can put Trump's head on Margaret Thatcher.

Photography's always not true. There's a very famous photograph. It's from around 1962. From left to right, it's Jackie Kennedy, John Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. John Kennedy is standing behind a podium with a microphone, obviously giving a speech, and Jackie Kennedy is standing next to him. She's looking horrified, and Lyndon Johnson is pointing at her screaming at the top of his lungs. It looks devastating, like he's really giving it to her. What's actually happening is that they're at an airport, and John Kennedy is giving a speech, and somebody turned on a jet right behind Jackie Kennedy. Lyndon Johnson is pointing at the jet, which is right behind Jackie Kennedy saying, "Shut that fucking thing off." But the picture is of him pointing at Jackie screaming at the top of his lungs. It's a complete accident, but it's a picture

that was all over the press. So you can't trust photographs in that way; they don't tell the complete story. But there's something about photography that makes people believe that they're true. "One picture is worth a thousand words." Not really.

Phillips: It's interesting to hear you talk about this because there's been such a brouhaha recently about AI and ChatGPT and how we're not going to be able to trust anything anymore. But what you're saying is that—and also what you're saying in a different way, Cyrilla—is that our culture of photography and also our culture of law and so many other things are already steeped in a lack of truth.

Perkis: Let me push the idea much, much further, I hope not too far. The examples I gave are photographs presenting something as true that isn't. That's dramatic. The people on the bench and the JFK, Lyndon Johnson. But I'll give you an example right here. The photograph that Chip acquired [for the AMDF art collection] of the people in the backyard, the little kids and other people playing and the little girl standing there, you know the picture?

It looks like a dramatic, sad, mysterious thing, and what it was in reality was my older grandson's high school graduation party. It was a joyous occasion, and I'm sure all those people were having a really good time, but that moment completely changed the atmosphere of it. It had nothing to do with the atmosphere of that afternoon on that lawn at my daughter's house. Nothing. It's a good photograph, but it doesn't report accurately what was going on at all.

Mozenter: It was that moment and also that at that moment you were standing at a particular angle in relation to what was going on. If you had been standing three feet farther in either direction, you'd get a whole other story.

Perkis: Or if I'd released the shutter half a second earlier or later, it would be a different picture.

Phillips: But to take that even further . . . If we think about your idea of correspondence, you did capture something in this photograph that isn't just about joy; it's about something more complicated.

Perkis: Yeah.

Phillips: Couldn't you say then that you were capturing something that *was* there or *is* there in life?

Perkis: Yes. Because as soon as you know the single reason for anything, you're wrong.

Schumacher: Correspondence is, I think, an interesting way to approach likeness in portraiture. In fact, it's often referred, or at least I've taught, that it's not a photographic likeness that will actually help you achieve likeness in a painting or a drawing. It's looking for a correspondence, and that's why you have twenty different Rembrandt self-portraits and they all look slightly different, but they all look like him.

Perkis: Well [the artist] Cyrilla and I were mentioning, Alice Neel, who we think of as one of the greatest artists of modern times, her portraits are very clearly a combination of her and the sitter.

Schumacher: I guess what I've appreciated, the subject is not only the sitter. The subject is something else, also something more universal maybe. And it seems to me in the example you give of this moment that you captured at your grandson's party, the one out on the lawn, was that that was source material in a way from which you captured something that's broader, more universal. Is that true?

Phillips: Well, there's something always sad about a party, really, because a party ends, and there's something sad about a graduation because . . .

Mozenter: Even if it doesn't end, if you're in the middle of it, maybe you don't really want to be there.

Perkis: I hate to give him credit, but Picasso said, "Art is a lie that reveals the truth," and that ain't bad.

Phillips: So we've brought up correspondence again. And I was going to say, when you were talking about correspondence, one of the most interesting art exhibits I ever went to was in the Netherlands. It was an exhibition of Rembrandt's paintings of models in which other artists had also been present at the sitting, other artists had been drawing and painting the same subject

(model) alongside Rembrandt. The museum had tracked down five or six different artists including Rembrandt drawing the same scene and painting the same scene. And it was so fascinating because . . .

Perkis: Different worlds.

Phillips: It was different worlds. Each painting was a different world, even though it was the exact same scene.

Mozenter: That is interesting.

Perkis: Well, we could push the thing and maybe say, "I have no idea what world you see. And you have no idea what world I see." But we're getting off the chart now.

Phillips: If somebody were to say that we tend to see only that which we are predisposed to look for, what would be your response?

Perkis: Sure, but we have these, how many senses? Hearing, vision, taste, feeling. Seeing is the only sense . . . We hear everything, and then our mind decides what to pay attention to. We're in a bar and we're talking to someone and the pianist is playing a little tune and there are people next to us having a conversation and then there's somebody down at the end of the bar yelling for another beer. But we pay attention to the person we're talking with. When it's hot, I feel the heat on my skin, and it either bothers me or it doesn't. When I taste something, I taste that it's sour or sweet or something, and I like it or I

don't like it. With vision, we choose what to look at. Our field of vision is actually extremely small. Of sharp vision, at least. Because we only see sharply with our macula.

The rest of the retina, which is over 90 percent of it, is out of focus. In my teaching book I have what I call the push-pin exercise where you put two push pins in the wall, three inches apart, very close, and you sit ten feet away and you concentrate on the push pin on the left. You really look at it and you realize that the push pin on the right is slightly fuzzy. And then you shift your vision to the push pin on the right, and you realize that the push pin on the left is slightly fuzzy. My brain, or whatever it is, looks at things and chooses what to look at to see the sharpness.

I mean, my vision's gone [now], but if I [still] had good vision, if I looked at the leg of that tripod, the center leg, the leg to the right and the left would be slightly fuzzy, but Brian would be way out of focus. I wouldn't recognize who he was. Vision is the only sense that [involves choice]: we choose what to look at. The camera—depending on the lens you have on and the angle that it's looking, there are wider lenses and more narrow lenses—it sees everything equally from left to right and top to bottom, not front to back. That's a focus thing. But from left to right and up and down, it sees everything with equal emphasis. So photographing is very different than looking, and I have to train myself to learn the difference.

Phillips: So you came to these observations about vision and about how we see during the course of teaching. Is this because you were so attuned to your

own vision that you became aware of these things? I think a lot of artists I know would not be quite that conscious of what happens to the field of vision when they focus on a single object.

Perkis: I got really interested in the difference between a photograph and what you see—part of it was teaching, part of it was just my curious mind. I started to realize that they're not the same, that a photograph doesn't look like what I see. So I started thinking about that more and more, studying it and looking, talking to people about it. It's very interesting.

Phillips: We've already talked a lot about chance today. Brian and I were really interested in your writing about John Cage and his idea of Chance Operations. Does his idea enter into your own way of making work?

Perkis: Very, very much. The first art form that I related to was jazz. I was about twelve years old. Jazz uses chance and improvisation, and I was always thrilled by that. So that was part of it. But John Cage, the recording I have that I've been listening to for it's now fifty years, is very important to me. I forget now, I'm blocking the name of it.

It's John Cage and David Tudor. David Tudor is playing the piano and John Cage is telling ninety stories in ninety minutes. And the longer stories, he talks faster, and the shorter stories, he talks slower.

"Indeterminacy in Modern Music." It's a very important piece of art. He just tells these stories. Some of them are his own experiences and some of them

are stories that he's read or heard or something like that. And some of them are very funny and some of them, David Tudor blocks them out, he plays the piano and I think three radios, and he's inside the piano doing within the strings and stuff like that. It's a very important work of art, that piece.

Phillips: I see over here a lot of CDs. It looks like Bach. Bach and Thelonious Monk are important?

Mozenter: Featured.

Phillips: Music has continued to be pretty important to you.

Perkis: Yeah, I like jazz and Bach.

Phillips: I know that Brian likes to listen to music while he's painting. Would you listen to music in the darkroom?

Perkis: I used to, and then I stopped.

Phillips: Why?

Perkis: My hearing is weird. It's part of the dyslexia. And then my hearing got worse. The last few years I had it quiet in the darkroom. But I used to listen to jazz all the time in the darkroom, and Bach.

Phillips: Because it was inspiring?

Perkis: Yeah.

Schumacher: Do you feel like your work changed when you stopped listening to music?

Perkis: No, I don't think so. My work was changing as I was getting older. Since we moved here, my work got less pointed, and I was printing old negatives from Mexico and from Egypt, which was interesting. I had never done that before.

Phillips: What do you mean by "less pointed"?

Perkis: I became even less interested in subject matter and more interested in the form and the tone and the emotion of the picture.

Phillips: Can you elaborate on what you mean when you say there can be an idea in a photograph and give examples from your own work?

Perkis: One could say that every photograph is an idea. I could cheat on this answer because I don't know the answer. William Carlos Williams, "no ideas but in things." I don't know if that's helpful or confusing, but that's a pretty brilliant statement. In other words, a photograph is an idea in a way that this is a construction of what I was looking at and how it changed when it was photographed. And the difference between what it looks like when you're looking at it and what a small black and white photograph of it is.

See, most photographs are miniaturized. If I take a picture of you and I make a sixteen by twenty print, that's a lot smaller than you are. So photographs are not as realistic as we think. It is a learned language. I mentioned Margaret Mead [in his book *Teaching Photography*]. She went somewhere where people had never seen photographs. She liked to do stuff like that, and she showed them photos of trees. Where the picture was of the whole tree, they understood it. But where the picture was of part of a tree, they had no idea what it was a picture of. The conclusion she came to is that photography to some degree is a learned language. We learn to look at photographs and see what they are. But we don't know that because kids grow up with photographs. So at some point they're understanding them. We can't really pin it down. But photography is learned. We learn to see them.

Phillips: You have an amazing story in this book [*Teaching Photography*] about your daughter.

Perkis: Oh, the elephant. My daughter and I were just laughing about it the other week. When she was about two years old . . . we were kind of buddies. We lived in New York, and she loved elephants. Like little kids get obsessed with things. She had little toy elephants, and I think there was some kind of a record where elephants were singing, or I don't know what the hell. But she loved elephants. So I said, come on, we'll go look at an elephant. We'll go meet an elephant. I took her up to the Central Park Zoo. Back then it was really dank and cold and dark. I took her into the elephant house. She was on my shoulders, which is how we traveled in New York. And I said, there's the

elephant. And she goes, "Where?" I said, "Right in front of you." And she couldn't see it. It was too big. She got really upset. She couldn't see the elephant because it was out of the range of her preconception of what something could be.

She never saw it. She never saw the elephant, and it was like fifteen feet away from her. Big gray elephant.

Phillips: That's an amazing story about perception.

Schumacher: When did she start to see an elephant?

Perkis: Oh, I have no idea. But she's sixty-two now, and I think she can see them.

Schumacher: I guess that invites the question of what are we not seeing now that's right in front of us?

Perkis: Yeah, yeah.

Schumacher: Surely there's an abundance of things right in front of us that we don't see because we don't know how to look for it, or it's being occluded by preconceptions about what we think we're seeing.

Phillips: We started off today's conversation about elephants, and you have this story about elephants from your daughter. Our daughter's story about

elephants is that Brian took our daughter to a zoo to see them when she was about two, the Roger Williams Zoo in Providence, Rhode Island, and she said, I don't want to be here because the elephants are sad.

Schumacher: She saw them for the first time and said, "They're so sad. They want to be free."

Mozenter: She was right. I'm sure.

Perkis: The whole idea of zoos is problematic, I think.

Phillips: As much as I would love to continue the conversation we're having now, I'm going to move on to some questions about your vision. As I understand it, your vision problems began in 2007 with a retinal occlusion.

Perkis: Right.

Phillips: Can you tell me about that experience and its impact on your photographic practice?

Perkis: [It happened during a trip I took] to the Mayo Clinic because my friend, a psychiatrist who teaches at Harvard, could get us in there, and I wanted to be checked out. We were at the Mayo Clinic for five days or [so]. We were coming back, and we were on the plane. My left eye stopped working.

Phillips: Suddenly?

Mozenter: It was like Christmas Eve or a holiday. It was very stressful in the airport, packed.

Perkis: I thought it might've been the altitude because airplanes are not pressurized to sea level. They're pressurized to about 3,500 feet. So anyway, I didn't know what it was. And then doctor, doctor, test, test, central retinal occlusion. Cause: possibly blood pressure, possibly God knows what. But I was completely blind in my left eye. There's a little bit of light that sneaks in on the right, but no information. My left eye is my dominant, and I had photographed with that eye for fifty years at that point. So it was pretty bad. I had the camera and I'd pick up the camera and try to hold it to my right eye, and I physically couldn't do so. The camera would sneak across to my left eye.

So I didn't photograph for about six months, and I slowly got back into it using a small point-and-shoot camera, which I still use. I mean, I don't anymore. It's a wonderful little camera. And I finally was able to look through the camera with my right eye. And that's when I did that twilight portfolio that you brought back today. That was the first stuff I photographed after I lost my eye. And that's when I met this retinal doctor who became a friend. He's a wonderful guy, and he's going to do the injection in my right eye. I didn't drive for several months. I was scared to, but I slowly got back into it. When you only have one eye, you're not seeing distance, you're not seeing depth, everything's flat. It took me a while, and I'd say after a year I was fine, but I didn't have a spare. And then that's what happened.

Phillips: When you say when you were on the plane and your vision went, was it just sudden blindness in your left eye?

Perkis: Yeah, it was gone. It just shut off.

Phillips: That must have been really scary.

Perkis: It was terrifying. [When] it actually happened, about three quarters of it was gone, and then the next day, the rest of it kind of finished off.

Phillips: It took about a year to adjust. You've thought a lot about vision. What do you think happened during that adjustment period that allowed you to manage fine once you'd adjusted to having vision left in just one eye?

Perkis: [This is] not just my idea. The eye is more part of the brain than any other part. The brain controls the vision. They're very connected. And my spelling got better after that happened. It's weird. Neurological pathways. My friend John Levine, a psychiatrist, asked his friends at Harvard Med about it, and they said that you'll [make] new neural pathways when something like that happens. It changed me a little and my pictures changed, and I think I changed a little bit, but I adjusted quite well. I started driving fine and I did everything.

Phillips: I think you said in that movie that was made that you feel like the pictures you started to take with your right eye were different in some way.

Perkis: They were a little different. I'm not sure if it was a visual thing or a spiritual/psychological thing. They became more abstract, I think, and more dreamlike. I think my interests changed. Maybe I realized my mortality a little bit. I don't know. I can't really answer it clearly, but it did change me.

Phillips: So in 2015, the vision in your right eye started to weaken?

Perkis: Yeah, I started getting macular degeneration.

Phillips: How did you realize that was happening?

Perkis: I wasn't seeing as well.

Phillips: Were you seeing wavy lines, or do you remember?

Perkis: The bathroom that I use the most has square tiles with dark lines. So that's a vision test. When I go to the toilet, I sit and I look and I see. If I look in my central vision, I don't see the black lines, but in my peripheral vision I do, which is a standard test.

Phillips: Right, an Amsler grid.

Perkis: So I have my built-in vision test, and I just started realizing it, and then went to the eye doctor and I have dry macular degeneration. It kept getting worse. [The] eye doctor that I see up here thinks that it might be stable now. It might be as bad as it's going to get.

Phillips: I hope so. It's pretty bad, right?

Perkis: I get around, I'm still cooking at night, and I can get around, I can find things, mostly. I'm functioning, but I can't drive. I'm scared in the city. I don't like to go in. I don't like to be in a crowd. But what can you do? I'm also eighty-seven.

Phillips: Is it possible for you to describe what you can see?

Perkis: I see you as a form. I see that you are wearing a sleeveless dark dress. I see that you're holding your hands like this. I think. But I can't see your eyes or your nose or your mouth or whether you're smiling or frowning or anything like that. I can't really see Brian at all because the light's behind him. I can't tell if there's anybody there. And I can't see Cyrilla at all. If she's still there.

Mozenter: She is.

Schumacher: What do you see when you look at Cyrilla though?

Phillips: You can't see her because of the way the light is falling?

Perkis: She just blends into the whole.

Mozenter: And also I'm sitting very still.

Perkis: If you move, I'll see you.

Mozenter: I'm moving.

Perkis: Yeah, I see her now. But I can see the dark rectangles on the wall.

Schumacher: So just to really try to understand. If you look at Cyrilla, can you describe what you do see? Is it fuzzy shapes or is it . . .

Perkis: No, I don't see any shape.

I see kind of a hazy . . . Well, she just moved, so I saw her, but if she doesn't move I just see like a hazy white gray. I also don't see color very much. I can tell that that's reddish, that thing, but barely. It's a guess. I can see my hand and five fingers.

Schumacher: So you're more nearsighted.

Perkis: I can see better closer. But I can't read at all or do anything like that.

Phillips: You mentioned that a couple of weeks ago you started reading the great 19th-century American Civil War poet Walt Whitman. Is Cyrilla reading that to you?

Perkis: No, I have a recording. We got a recorder of a player from what we call the Blind Club. I don't know what the official name of it is, but they send you a very good recorder, and then they have a website and you just order books.

Mozenter: It's called the Talking Book something.

Perkis: I'm listening to, I think it's about twenty-two hours of *Leaves of Grass*. And I just finished about thirty hours of Jack Kerouac. What is it? *The Legend of Cody*?

Mozenter: *Visions of Cody*.

Perkis: I think Kerouac is the 20th-century Whitman, who's the 19th-century Whitman. I think they're very similar. I listen to a lot of Gertrude Stein. I listened to two books of Virginia Woolf's. I listen to some science books. I'm enjoying listening to books now.

Phillips: I'm a huge fan of listening to books. A lot of people hate listening to books. What's it like for you?

Perkis: What happened was I went blind and immediately everybody was telling me to listen to books. "Oh, it's just as good." And I didn't do anything for about a year. And then I got a recording of a person who I respect a lot—I mean, I never met him—reading Gurdjieff's main book. I listened to that for about two years on an iPad. It was hard to hear, but I'd hold it up. And I did that for about two years. And then we ordered this machine, and now I'm

listening to literature. I'm not well-read. I'm not well-educated in that way. I had never read Whitman. I had never read Virginia Woolf. I had read Gertrude Stein some years ago, because Cyrilla's a Gertrude Stein . . . She's the head of the Gertrude Stein fan club at Stony Point. The only member.

Phillips: [to Cyrilla] I took out my Gertrude Steins out of a box the other day, including her book *How to Write*. I thought of you because I know you're a fan.

Mozenter: She's the best.

Perkis: Cyrilla's mind and Gertrude Stein's mind are definitely related. They're not the same, but they definitely have a kinship.

Phillips: I'm struck by the fact that you memorize some of what you read or some of what you are listening to. Is that something you've always been able to do, remember these passages? Or is that something that's come late?

Perkis: I don't know.

Phillips: I have to consciously work to memorize passages from what I read. And I often get it wrong when I try to regurgitate it.

Perkis: I get everything wrong, and I can't remember things and stuff like that.

Phillips: Can you tell us about the making of your last photographs?

Perkis: The last photographs, which are here and are going to be in a book called *Nōtan* that I'm working on with my publisher and dear friend Taehee. When I realized that I was headed for not photographing, it became clear that that was where I was headed, I took that point-and-shoot camera and I said, I'm going to try for a year. And I just started photographing in the house and around the house, and mostly at this small park that Cyrilla and I had been going to. We really like it. It's a park that's completely not fancy. There's a swing set there and there's a little bench. Nothing much, but it's very beautiful. We went there quite a bit.

So I just started taking pictures here in the yard and out the windows and at that little park and another park up by Bear Mountain and photographing and developing film and printing. And I kept it up for, I guess about fourteen months. And then at a certain point, I realized, "Stop before they get not good anymore." I wanted to stop at the top of my game, and I have sixty prints from that period. I just walked out of the darkroom, and I think there's still a negative in the enlarger. It was like, "That's it." Cyrilla and two friends chose thirty-eight of the sixty to put in the book. But I'm going to eliminate another ten, I think. Those are my last photographs. You saw them. I think they're interesting.

Phillips: I think they are too.

Perkis: I almost eliminated subject matter, which I think has been something I've been trying for for a long time. You have to have subject matter in

photography and in writing. Music and painting and sculpture, you don't need subject matter. But photography and writing, you need subject matter. It has to be about something. And I think I've gotten that down to a pretty minimal thing, like a shadow on a wall or a little piece of ice on the sidewalk or something like that.

Phillips: Is it superficially cheerful to say that, in a way, in these last photographs you really sort of completed a vision you had of what a photograph could be and should be?

Perkis: Well, I would say that's a little pretentious, but in that direction, I would admit, yeah. Yeah, I would admit to going in that direction pretty well in that last year. I think so. I think Cyrilla thinks so.

Phillips: Based on the writing that you've shared that you've done with Cyrilla's help, I feel like your photographer's vision is alive in that writing. Do you think you've been able to transfer that to writing because photography and writing share something?

Perkis: There's the idea that in photography you see something interesting and then you make a good composition out of it. That's maybe not the most profound use of the medium or the most profound understanding of the medium. In writing, it's like, well, you think of something really interesting to write about and then you write it well. But maybe Charles Olson and Ezra Pound and Ann Carson and Gertrude Stein have different thoughts about writing. The plot was fantastic, and he really said it well, so I could really

understand it. And it kept moving at a great pace. Maybe that's not the deepest concept of writing, and I'm sure you agree with me.

Phillips: Yes, I do.

Perkis: No, there's this thing . . . a good way maybe to end this discussion. I don't know if Cyrilla can find it, but how do you make art? [There's] Charles Olson's poem "A Foot Is to Kick With." It's one of my favorites. It's like, how do you make art? And I say, read Charles Olson's "A Foot Is to Kick With" and everybody gets so pissed off. What the hell? How dare you? And I used to read it to my class and they'd just look at me like crazy. Anyway, we done?

Phillips: Yes, we are done.

THE END