

STEPHEN SHORE *shore to shore*

To be entirely truthful, I rarely do much research before conducting an interview with an artist. I know it might seem lazy, but I often find that a little naïveté is inviting and, in a way, challenging to both parties. I had to ditch my modus operandi, however, for Stephen Shore, exactly because I did not want to rely on my visual instinct, for if I did, I would too easily slide into a David Lynch-inspired cavalcade of truisms about diners, drive-ins, and dives. Shore enjoys the dual acclaim as a skilled technician/practitioner and the creator of an emotional and visual genre (alongside William Eggleston). I wondered how form and thematic collide in the aftermath of the "Pictures Generation" discourse, or, more broadly, the discussion surrounding postmodern photo-conceptualism. Shore led me one step closer to an answer. Shore's work is currently included in "Ordinary Pictures" at the Walker Art Center (until October 9, 2016) and "This Place" at the Brooklyn Museum (through June 5, 2016).

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS: *In Stephen Shore: Survey, you and David Company discuss your occupation of multiple genres, namely documentary and conceptualism. I want to take that one step further and think about your embodiment or your occupation of multiple historical strands in addition to genres. Looking back at your varied artistic production, I wanted to ask you, how can we think about the history of photography in a less segmented fashion? There are photographers like you who occupy multiple realms.*

STEPHEN SHORE: Beaumont Newhall was the first curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. He wrote *The History of Photography*, which went through many different editions, and in one of the earlier editions, the last chapter is called "Recent Trends." He defines four trends: The document, the straight photograph, the formalist photograph, and the equivalent. The document is obviously pointing at something in the

world and saying, "This is something you should pay attention to." And the straight photograph is the self-conscious work of art that says, "If you were to look at this image I've created, this is what you should pay attention to." We extend this to the formalist photograph and the equivalent, to use Stieglitz's term.

But what struck me is that, at the time, what I was looking at the most was Walker Evans, who is also the subject of Newhall's first one-person exhibition. His pictures, to use your term *occupy*, occupy all four of Newhall's trends. I think people recognize his work as a formalist experiment, as a document, and that he's a self-conscious artist. Perhaps the least understood is the equivalent. The one time I saw Evans speak was in 1972. The main theme of his talk was the term "transcendent documents". So he was talking about his work, in a way, as equivalents – as an image standing for or embodying a state of mind. The one other thing I would add to that is something that Newhall didn't mention; Evans also spoke of his work earlier, probably at the time he was making it, as photographing in documentary style. He was saying that he was adopting a visual language that has a cultural meaning, so that he could draw that cultural meaning to his work and explore it. And the reason I'm bringing all of this up is that when you talk about the Pictures Generation, I would think that Evans is a progenitor.

WILLIAM: *It's interesting, because I took a seminar on documentary photography at the Graduate Center taught by Siona Wilson, and the only artist of the Pictures Generation who was included was Martha Rosler. Considering what you just said, it makes me think that as scholars and critics look back retroactively, it seems that we impose a different relationship to that cultural documentary mode between, say, Walker Evans and Laurie Simmons. What is the nature of that shift?*

STEPHEN: I'm not so sure that the shift is as dramatic as one would expect, and I think where the difference is that, to use



Newhall's framework, if a picture is only a document, and not a self-conscious work of art with no formal or structural intent, it comes across as an illustration. John Szarkowski once said, "An illustration is a photograph whose problems were solved before the picture was made." So there is a gulf between, say, a certain kind of journalistic photographer and Walker Evans. That gulf between the journalistic photographer and Walker Evans may be greater than the distance between Walker Evans and Laurie Simmons, even though superficially, we might call both of their work documents.

Or to make it even more complicated, I teach with Gilles Peress, who is viewed as a photojournalist, but the aesthetic intent of his pictures is so sophisticated that I would say that there is an equally deep gulf between his view of photojournalism, and the kind of illustrative photojournalism you may find in typical magazines these days. And that kind of photography, which is entirely content driven, may cloud how people who are not photographers or people who don't have a lot of experience in photography think about the intentions of other people who are doing pictures that are more complex.

What I mean by content driven is that...sometimes people send me pictures and say "This is my version of one of your pictures." And it may have a gas station in it, but it doesn't look anything like mine. It's not the way I would structure it, it's not the way the light would look, and it's not even the distance I would use. It looks nothing like one of my pictures. The only similarity is that it's not a pretty landscape; it's of an urban intersection or something. So I understand what these people are seeing when they look at my work - only the content. And they think that if their picture has a gas station in it, even though it doesn't look vaguely like one of my pictures, then it will look like one of mine.

Another example is the architect and architectural writer Christopher Alexander. He wrote a book on aliveness in art, and I find his perception of architecture to be absolutely fascinating. As an example of aliveness, he uses a picture he took of this beautiful old Havana building, and then he juxtaposes it with an image of a rubble-strewn alley with some kids playing in it, and this is an example of a lack of aliveness. He's not thinking of any formal relationships; the camera is simply pointing at something. And the picture of the alley is taut and beautiful and poetic. And so to my mind, it's the exact opposite. Because, I'm seeing the whole picture and he's only seeing what the picture is pointing to. There are those photographers who see that way, and in the minds of some people who really don't grasp photography, they conflate people who are only pointing at things with people who are making complex images even though on a superficial level the pictures may look very similar.

WILLIAM: *That makes perfect sense to me, but I had never thought of it that way until you articulated it. At least*

when you take a history of photography survey, you likely learn that Eggleston, Shore, and diCorcia do banal scenes of Americana. Then you learn about Cindy Sherman's and Laurie Simmons's feminism. And then you learn Robert Longo critiques masculinity, and so on. In photography after 1960, it seems that only a few photographers are allowed to have, in the mindset of critics, a formal groundwork to their pictures. They become entirely transparent to subject matter, which I think is part of the postmodern, poststructuralist desire to make things more politically active, but isn't there politics of form as well?

STEPHEN: I think a huge amount is communicated structurally in the picture. Think of how much is communicated through the structure of music. Visual structure is photography's equivalent of that. I don't know if you're familiar with Gregory Crewdson's earlier work, where the pictures are like dioramas. They were scenes like a pond with giant insects, with a suburban house in the background, and these pictures were done entirely in his studio. He had this large, square table, and he would decorate it; he would put up a backdrop - a photograph or a painting - and then he would get artificial plants, and different items and put them in and build this complex world. So everything in the picture was fabricated, but then he would take his camera and walk around it and take the picture. He built a square table, but if he knew what the picture was in advance, all he had to do was build a triangular world. So when he takes his camera and decides the picture to take, he's making a decision that is exactly like my decision, of where I'm going to stand and where the edge is going to fall.

So I'm taking a world that is a result of cultural forces and natural forces, and deciding what segment I'm going to photograph and where I'm going to stand exactly, what the structure will be like and what I'm including and not including, and what visual juxtapositions are going to be created by my vantage point. Crewdson is doing exactly the same thing. And again, to repeat myself, if he had the picture in his mind in advance, he didn't have to spend hours extra building things that wound up not being included in the picture. All he would need is a triangle that matched the angle of sight of the lens. There are obvious differences between us; I'm dealing with the world that's in front of me and he's dealing with a world he's creating. But on another level, we're doing something very similar.

WILLIAM: *So in that way society, embodiment, and form are unified for the both of you in the sense that it's about your particular construction of a viewpoint.*

STEPHEN: Yes. And what content we choose to put in.

WILLIAM: *Continuing off of what you were saying about*



Stephen Shore, Previous Spread: *New York City, New York*, September-October 1972.

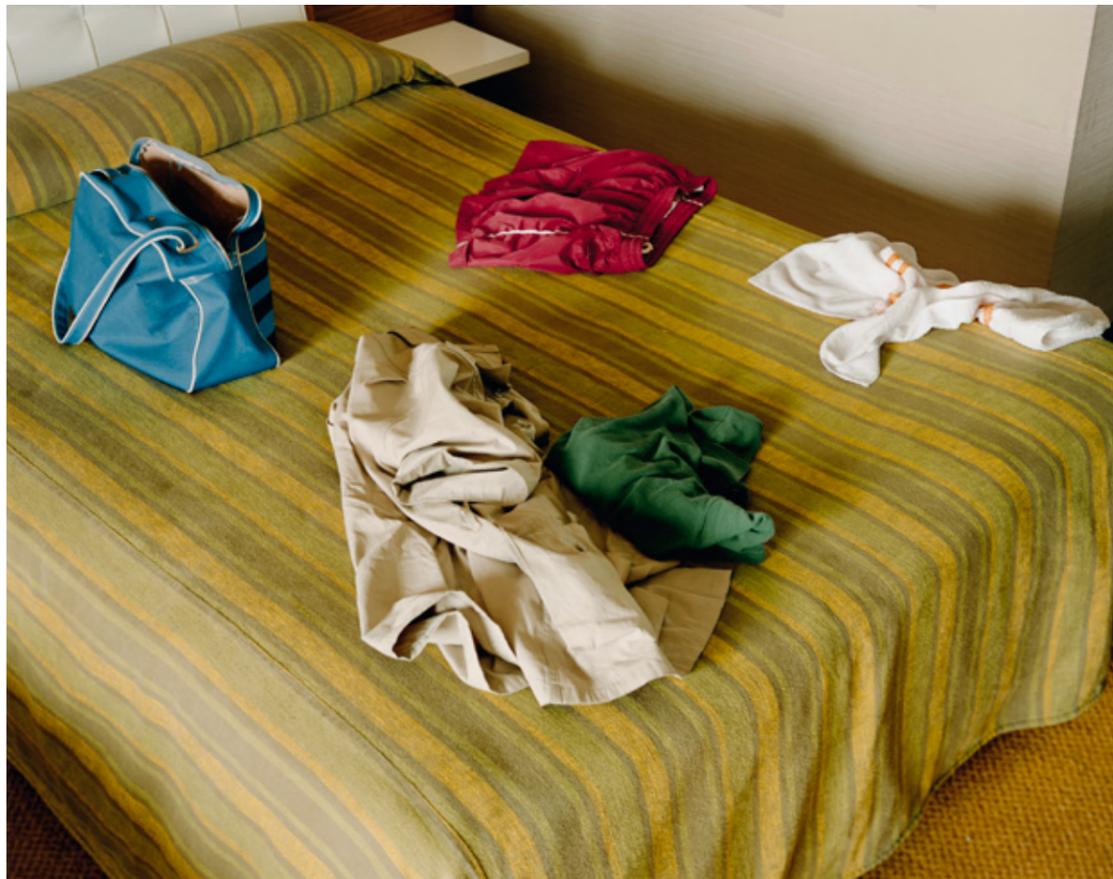
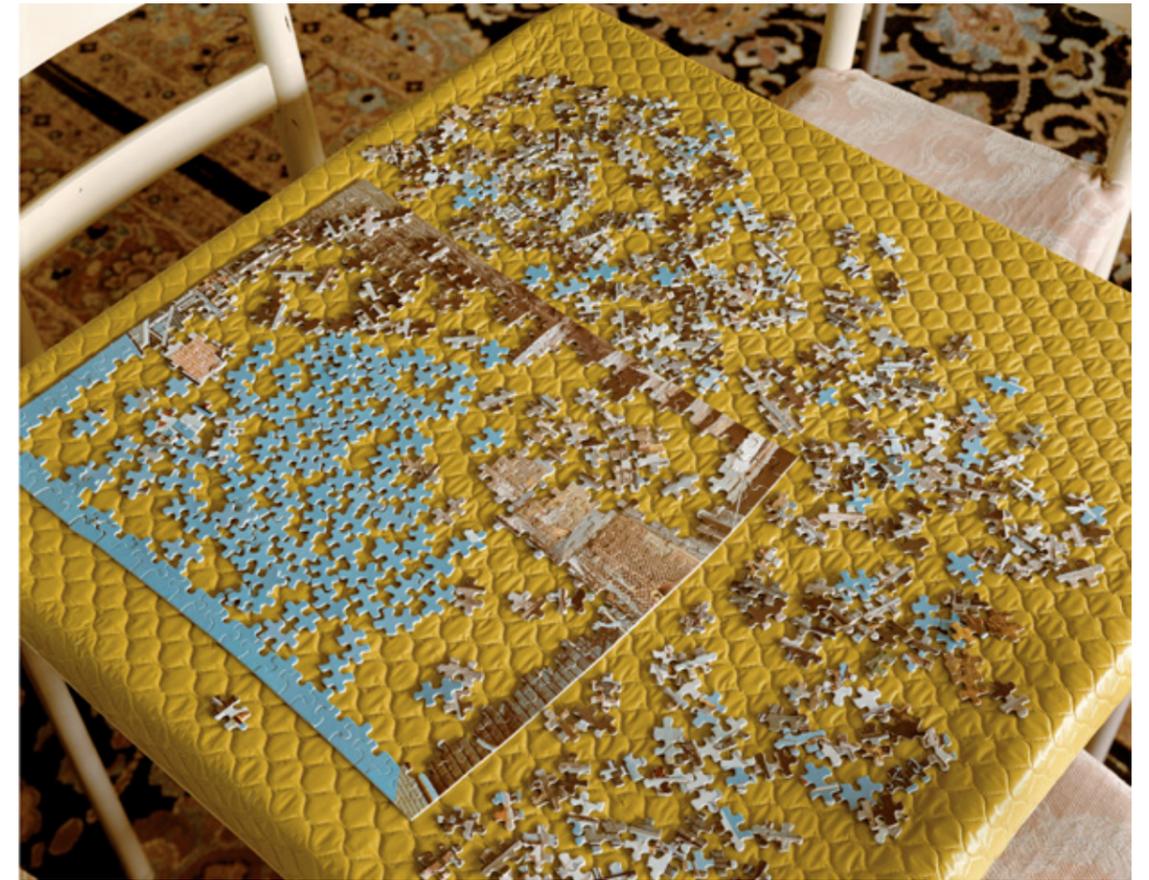
Stephen Shore, Top & Bottom: *Luzzara, Italy*, 1993; Following spread: *Holbrook, Arizona*, June 1972.





Stephen Shore, Top: Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975;
Bottom: Natural Bridge, New York, July 31, 1974.

Stephen Shore, Top: South of Klamath Falls, U.S. 97, Oregon, July 21, 1973;
Bottom: Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979



Stephen Shore, Top: Crosby Street and Grand Street, New York, New York, February 24, 1974;
Bottom: Room 131, Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, June 21, 1974

Stephen Shore, Top: Lookout Hotel, Ogunquit, Maine, July 16, 1974;
Bottom: Texas Hots, 2693 South Park Avenue, Lackawanna, Pennsylvania, October 25, 1977



misinterpretation of your imagery, is how interesting it is that the gas station has become such a forceful symbol of a certain kind of glam, West Coast, neo-noir Americana. I don't know if this is totally far afield, but to expand on this, I always saw your subject matter and your use of color as a particularly queer activity. I always thought it was so interesting that you're a straight photographer. But a lot of your images have this campy glitz interspersed with a mundane aura, which makes them feel kind of queer to me. I do not mean in the sense of same-sex desire, but rather in with regard to an imaginary that is rooted in both every day and something beyond the every day.

STEPHEN: I can see that. I can't really put my words in the frame of a queer mindset, but would you say that there is an aspect of detachment?

WILLIAM: *I think that's a really great way of putting it. I'm a bit of a closet formalist myself and I'm constantly accused of being apolitical, but I still like to think that there's some sort of a queer aesthetic that is not necessarily attached to queer bodies, which is why I was thinking about your work in this vein. Detachment is exactly right because queerness inherently represents being a part of culture, being a part of the visual economy, but always being invested in something that is slightly removed. Like camp, like nostalgia, like cruising spots in a suburban wasteland. Detachment is, in some sense, intrinsic to photograph, right?*

STEPHEN: I'm not sure. But it's something that I recognize is in my work. I'm fascinated by the culture and taking actual pleasure in the culture, but with some kind of detachment from it.

WILLIAM: *Now I'm realizing that the opposite strategy is actually more associated with queer and feminist artists like Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe - who give you more immediacy. But at the same time, that's not necessarily the psychic experience that one goes through when one is thinking about gender and sexuality. Queerness has to do with hidden items, items that are slightly too far away from us to grasp; all of these things I see in your work as being the extraordinary nature of the everyday, or the strangeness of the everyday.*

STEPHEN: I find that I'm fascinated by seeing the everyday with attention. That comes into play, or is clearer when the subject is in fact everyday. Regarding the nostalgia that some people see in my work - it's simply because the pictures from the 70s were taken 40 years ago. When people saw them at the time, they didn't look nostalgic. Another thing is that the new edition of *Uncommon Places* has about 170 pictures in it. Two of them have gas sta-

tions. Two out of 170. And they both happen to be in the same intersection—two views of the intersection of Beverly and La Brea. The original edition only had one gas station.

WILLIAM: *There's a resurgence of interest in these sort-of liminal, debased icons of American culture. Maybe it's because of Lana Del Rey or Matthew Barney. But what you said made me think that your photography might be more connected in a certain way to Félix González-Torres, in that his works are entirely and self-consciously part of the everyday, to the extent that you can actually take it home with you, but as you mentioned, the impact is all the more powerful as a result. That would be an interesting exhibition, because you were working contemporaneously. But again, going back to the issue of historicism, we put González-Torres in the gay artist camp, and the non-photographer camp, but it seems like there may be more connections than differences.*

STEPHEN: Yes. To pay attention to something that's extraordinary doesn't take a great aesthetic leap. Recently I've been doing lots and lots of interviews and I've been thinking that, in a certain way, I want to hear what other people have to say. My answers are the same every time because those are my answers. But other people have perceptions about my work that I also find interesting, because an artist's production can come partially from intentional concerns of theirs, but also from their unconscious. An artist could be doing things, or things may be arising in their work, that they're not fully, consciously aware of. Someone else could bring a perception to the work and open a door to it or a facet of it that may actually help the artist see the full range of what they're doing. So, I'm actually very interested in other people's perceptions of my work.

WILLIAM: *I think what I was getting at by suggesting a queer element of your work is the wide-ranging emotional register in your photography. Could you discuss the evolution of this emotional component of your work?*

STEPHEN: Well, there was evolution of formal concerns; there was an evolution of content. In the '70s, I mostly focused on North American culture. A lot of it focused on the built environment. In the '80s, a lot of it was focused on landscape, and part of the shift was that as I evolved as a person, there were other levels that I wanted the works to deal with. In the '90s, the work took a turn, with a series I did in Luzara, Italy, which is just about to be republished as a book. Most recently, I did a book in Ukraine and in each of these different bodies of work the content is different and the emotional investment is different. And it's not something that's necessarily planned. It's that I'm getting older and my response to things changes.

Stephen Shore. Opposite: Top: Home of Abram Ruvinovich and Malka Pavlovna, Bazaliya, Khmelnytska District, Ukraine, July 27, 2012; Bottom: Home of Vera Vulfovna, Khust, Zakarpatska District, Ukraine, October 12, 2013; Following spread: New York City, New York, March-April 1973

