Stephen Shore interviewed by Luc Sante

Stephen Shore's The Nature of Photographs *was first published in 1998; the book developed out of his course on photography at Bard College, where he has been a professor for twenty-four years. Shore arranges his approach to photographs into three broad sections: the first describes the photograph as object (the Physical Level), the second considers the illusion that exists upon that object (the Depictive Level), and the third examines the quality of how the viewer processes and focuses on space within an image (the Mental Level). This spring, Phaidon will release an updated and expanded edition of* The Nature of Photographs. *Recently,* Aperture *invited writer Luc Sante to speak with Shore about some of the ideas that are explored in the volume.*

LUC SANTE: I want to ask you about a particular sentence on the first page of the book: "The print has a physical dimension; it is not a true plane."

STEPHEN SHORE: What I mean is that it's a piece of paper. The image has a picture plane—but a true plane exists in only two dimensions, and a piece of paper has three dimensions. I wanted to emphasize that it is an object, and that on the object there is an image. The image is an illusion that's embedded in a physical object.

LS: At one point in the book, referring to Nicholas Nixon's image *Friendly, West Virginia*, you write that Nixon *solves* a picture, rather than *composes* one. Could you elaborate on that distinction?

SS: "Composition" seems to me to be a term borrowed from painting. A vocabulary was developed in the critique of painting, and then along came a new medium that also takes place on a flat rectangle—and so photography borrowed those terms. The word "composition" comes from the Latin root *componere*, which means "to put together." It is the Latin complement of the Greek root of the word "synthesis." With a painting, you're taking basic building blocks and making something that's more complex than what you started with. It is a synthetic process. A photograph does the opposite: it takes the world, and puts an order on it, simplifies it. It is an analytic process.

LS: The propositions in this book are a bit like Zen koans, and sometimes they make me want a little more—as when you contrast an Eggleston picture with your picture of El Paso—and you talk about how one is an open composition and the other is enclosed.

SS: I am talking about framing. In some images, the frame acts as the *end* of the picture. I may want to take a portrait of you, and I decide where your face is going to go in the picture, and then I'm aware of the frame. The picture simply has to end somewhere, and I make a decision about where that is. But often with the view camera, the frame is not the end but the *beginning* of the picture. It's as though the photographer starts with the frame and builds the picture in from the frame.

LS: You include a Japanese print in the book. I've been thinking about the Impressionists, specifically Degas, and how he learned from Japanese prints. . . . The Impressionists' use of the frame seemed to anticipate photography. But obviously, the camera apparatus itself taught photographers with no background about the semi-arbitrary nature of framing.

SS: Degas was also taking photographs—so as an artist, he could have learned both from the Japanese print and from photography. John Szarkowski talks about the Japanese and Chinese scroll tradition: you turn the scrolls to see the image pass by, so you see an infinite number of framings—the way a photographer going out in the world sees an infinite number of framings.

LS: I was surprised by the picture by Thomas Annan in the book—of the alley with the small black square. It seems so startlingly modern: it's *about* that small black square, about geometry and texture and plane as well as volume, in a way that's astounding for a mid nineteenth-century image. It brings to mind another picture in the book, by Berenice Abbott, *Department of Docks, New York City, 1936*, which, you say, "uses structural devices to emphasize deep space but has a shallow mental space." Are you referring to more than simply this kind of imaginary refocusing that we do when looking at certain photographs?

SS: The Abbott is an interesting example, because it clearly depicts deep space from the foreground, maybe eight feet away, to the sky. But when I look at it and, let's say, move my attention from the man in the suit in the foreground to the building behind him, I *know* that I'm looking at something farther away, but I don't have that physical sensation of my eyes changing focus. Also in the book, there is a photograph by Frederick Sommer. The space it represents is only a few feet deep. When I look at that one, I have a tremendous sense of refocusing with my eyes. With Sommer, I would guess that that is a deliberate effect. With the Abbott, I don't think it's necessarily deliberate. I think that some photographs, simply by chance, have that quality of refocusing. I also use the Walker Evans picture of the gas station in the book. He's so conscious of what he's doing—he's thinking about how this pole in the foreground relates to this gas station behind it in deep space in the real life, and how they also relate to each other sitting right on the picture plane.

LS: The Evans picture gets me thinking about metaphysics. This image is truly remarkable—it looks like a collage. The sky appears to float on a different plane, as though it were cut out from a different picture. You write: "This collaging appears when there is a difference in the degree of attention a photographer pays the different parts of this picture. For this to happen, the photographer needs to pay intense, clear, heightened attention to one part of the picture but not to another." Which suggests that something in the physics of the photo-making process responds to desire, or to a kind of telepathy.

SS: I would put it in more matter-of-fact terms. Let's say you're going to take a picture of me. You're aware of my

face and my head and shoulders, and you're deciding where you're going to put the frame—the frame relates to what you're paying attention to. But what if you realize that you weren't paying attention to the room behind me? As soon as you're aware of what's behind me, as well as me, you make a different framing decision. The frame resonates off of what you pay attention to. So it's not exactly metaphysical.

LS: Can you explain what relationship "mental modeling," as you call it, has to what one might call the "signature style" of an artist?

SS: If the signature style is something genuine, something inherent, as opposed to a stylization imposed on one's work, mental modeling is simply the natural inclination of that photographer. There has been this idea in photography of *previsioning* (to use Weston's term), which is having a mental image of the picture. The image an experienced photographer has in mind, whether it be conscious or unconscious, can guide all the little decisions that go into making a picture. It becomes the coordinating factor. With "mental modeling," I'm talking about making that conscious, becoming aware of it as an image, and not simply seeing out your eyes like out a window.

LS: It's been years since I've read Herrigel's *Zen In the Art of Archery*, but it seems to have many of the same ideas going on. The idea that when you're firing the arrow, you are the arrow, but you are also the target. You put yourself on the receiving end as well as on the sending end. That kind of concentration does seem like it's virtually a spiritual discipline.

That brings me to another question. In "The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses," Walter Benjamin says: "The work is the death mask of its conception." There's this perpetual sense of disappointment on the part of writers. I am interested in the fact that with photography, you seem to be saying, the more experienced you are, the closer you can get to pre-imagining what the final result will be, to getting down on your negative exactly what you set out to get.

SS: I wonder what Garry Winogrand would say? He talked about photographing in order to see how the world looks in the photograph.

LS: He's an interesting example. Photography is analytic, yes, but there is a tremendous amount that is owed to intuition. But it seems like Winogrand often deliberately set out to subvert his own analytic sense—to get something that he could not possibly anticipate.

SS: I'm not sure that's the case. I think there's a quality of inevitability in his work that comes from heightened attention. I am amazed by Winogrand's almost Olympic power of attention. To pay attention to one person, *really* pay attention to one person, is incredible. To pay attention to seven, which he does in *World's Fair, New York City*, is almost beyond comprehension.

LS: I've always wondered whether Winogrand wasn't entirely hyper-aware—whether he wasn't attempting to force the hand of the unknown. There's a difference between the photographer who is fully aware of everything that's going on in the frame, and the photographer whose attention is on one thing, and who may inadvertently, or maybe deliberately, invite accident. Do you think there's any of that going on with Winogrand?

SS: My sense is that he was hyper-aware, and that he clearly took advantage of circumstance.

LS: Inviting the accidental is a Surrealist proposition, but it's been taken up by a lot of people in various ways. When you have a really good amateur photograph, it's generally because some force of entropy has taken over. But for a professional, do you think it's possible to work with accident?

SS: Absolutely. When I talk about paying attention to one's own mental image, and paying attention to what you're photographing, it doesn't mean that it is 100 percent hermetically sealed attention. Things happen that photographers don't see, can't anticipate, and benefit by.

LS: I hear a lot from students and young photographers about originality—there's an anxiety that photography has reached an age when it's become impossible to enter uncharted continents. What do you think about that?

SS: I think it's always seemed that way, but someone is always bound to come along to prove us wrong. My own approach is not to strive to be original. In my work, I just have problems I want to solve, things I want to explore. For example, I didn't begin using color as a radical statement. I did it because I found that I loved postcards, and I didn't understand the prohibition against it. But most of the time I'm not thinking about originality.

LS: Stanley Cavell has argued that black-and-white depicts "already completed action," while color suggests that what is shown is part of something still unfolding. What are your thoughts about how color processes themselves date? It may be that even the color that we see now will, several decades hence, look like "the color of 2006."

SS: Well, people look at my pictures from the 1970s and talk about their "1970s color." In the book, I use an example of a picture by Anne Turyn: she purposefully chooses a palette that represents an earlier decade. I don't really think about color in Cavell's terms, but I believe that color carries cultural information—and that cultural information does date.

LS: You don't talk much about digital photography in the book. Do you think that any fundaments of photography have changed as a consequence of digitization?

SS: A lot has changed because of it, but I'm not sure it's the fundamentals. I'm not sure it's the things I'm talking about in this book.

LS: Do you see it as being an unstoppable historical force, and that photography on film is going to be a minority practice?

SS: I think it is an unstoppable force. But right now, I think there's a good case that can be made for film: if you want to make a large print, I haven't seen a digital image that can compare to a large-format negative, scanned and printed digitally. But the technology keeps changing.

I think one of the differences, though, is in *how* people take pictures. This may be a two-sided coin: there is a kind of freedom with digital photography, because it's immaterial, and it's free—it can both liberate people and lead to indiscriminateness. It can produce a lot of junk.

LS: You take one kind of photograph, but you're able to appreciate many. Did you always have that broad a range of interests, or is this something that came about as a consequence of teaching?

SS: I think I always had that range. I always collected pictures. I curated a show in 1971 called *All the Meat You Can Eat*, which was found images from my collection and the collections of two friends—postcards and snapshots and publicity stills and propaganda. I've always had an appetite for all kinds of photography.

I don't think my taste in pictures came from teaching—but this book came from teaching. I had been teaching a class at Bard called "Photographic Seeing" for years, first using Szarkowski's book *A Photographer's Eye* as a text, and then kind of heading off into my own territory. My book came out of ideas that I developed in that class. And also from the experience of having a friend . . . a potter—a very well-educated, artistically sensitive person—but she just didn't *get* photography. I thought: What would I say to her? What can I say to her so that she would look at a photograph and have a sense of what went into it? That's where it came from.

LS: Who is the ideal reader for this book?

SS: I can foresee a couple of readers. One would be a student of photography. Another would be my potter friend. Someone who wants to understand what a photograph is. I sometimes see a blind spot in people who are otherwise extraordinarily astute. Some regard the photograph as a finger pointing at content, and not a creative expression in itself. That's the distinction between a photograph and an illustration. I guess what it comes down to is: an illustration is aiming the camera at the direction of some content, while the photograph is making sense of it.