



# Stephen Shore: “Photography Isn’t Very Good at Explaining”

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by Brigitte Ollier & Jonas Cuénin

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Stephen Shore’s latest publication, *Steel Town*, released by MACK, depicts the fragility of the region in the United States known as the Rust Belt, devastated by the closing of steel mills in the 1970s.



Image from *Steel Town* (MACK, 2021) © Stephen Shore, Courtesy the artist and MACK.

*Steel Town* by Stephen Shore has just been released by MACK. The book is infused with a sense of austerity, as well as a kind of sadness the source of which is hard to pinpoint. Shore's color photographs seem both strange and familiar, a bit like a long-forgotten tune. The American photographer does not try to hide the reality; on the contrary, that's why he's there. Reality is what motivates this photo story first published in 1977 in *Fortune Magazine* under the title "Hard Times Come to Steeltown." Aged 30 at the time, Stephen Shore (b. October 8, 1947), now the author of over 40 books, admits that this was the "the most extensive [editorial commission] I had done for a magazine to that date."



Image from *Steel Town* (MACK, 2021) © Stephen Shore, Courtesy the artist and MACK.

Shore crisscrossed the state of New York, Western Pennsylvania, and Eastern Ohio, areas affected by the economic downturn just two years after the end of the Vietnam War. He was not there to draw up a real-estate report, but to show the “complexities” of the situation. Was he trying to draw attention to the disastrous human consequences brought by the decline of the steel industry? “I don’t believe photography is very good at explaining, let alone denouncing,” commented Stephen Shore. “Think about these sentences: One of the many factors contributing to the closing of the steel mills was the objections to modernizing coming from the steel workers’ unions themselves, for fear that modernization could lead to job loss. At that point, the antiquated American mills couldn’t compete with the more efficient Japanese steelworks. How can this complexity be expressed in a photograph? A photograph can, however, touch on the emotional center of a place. It can also describe.”

Even though he “didn’t know what to expect when [he] went,” he found doors opening to a young photographer, affording him “access to locations and people [he] would not have otherwise got to photograph.” Better yet: “The magazine’s researcher connected me with the Steelworkers’ Union, who, in turn, introduced me to the workers I photographed. They were totally welcoming.”



Image from Steel Town (MACK, 2021) © Stephen Shore, Courtesy the artist and MACK.



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In a context particularly difficult to navigate, Shore managed not to overcomplicate the subject: he never dramatizes. He takes his time, isolating shuttered businesses, bars without customers, deserted streets where even the vegetation is on strike. Meanwhile, the workers' serious faces seem to question the photographer, as if in the hope of a miracle solution. As usual, Shore doesn't seek complicity, avoids aestheticism, opting instead for sobriety and uniqueness: "I rarely take more than one picture of any subject. This has been how I've worked for decades." There is no emphasis, no narcissistic projection, but rather the sustained idea of a photographic document.

As is well known, *Fortune* printed many photographic reportages, especially under the editorship of Walker Evans (1945–65), the photographer all photographers secretly dream of becoming. Even if Evans took an ironic stance vis-à-vis the standards of the day and the ambivalent rules of objectivity (surreptitious photos of passengers on the New York subway), his original, impassioned writing makes him a permanent go-to reference in photography.





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Produced under Jimmy Carter's presidency (Democrat) and printed in the early days of Joe Biden's term (Democrat), *Steel Town* is not a political book in the usual sense of the word. It is a cultural trace, a precious record in the history of a year in America that also saw the launch of Apple II, the Star Wars saga, and the death of Charlie Chaplin, the most tender-hearted comedian in the age of cinema.



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In her very instructive introduction, Helen C. Epstein reminds us that Americans born in the two decades following World War II “grew up in an atmosphere of prosperity and hope.” This atmosphere vanished in the 1970s, and the next generation found themselves among the thousands of unemployed industrial workers. *Steel Town* is a resolute testament to that era.

**By Brigitte Ollier and Jonas Cuénin**

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**Stephen Shore, *Steel Town***, MACK, €50, 104 pp. With an introduction by Helen C. Epstein. The book is available [here](#). To learn more about Stephen Shore, [visit his website](#).



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