

Artifacts from the Now: Stephen Shore's MoMA Retrospective

How does the ordinary become art? Packed with photographs from over fifty years of Shore's varied (and storied) career, MoMA's landmark retrospective offers a poignant reflection on the revolutionary import of his pioneering vision.

Photographs by Stephen Shore

Exhibition review by Lev Feigin



Amarillo, Texas, July 1972. Chromogenic color print, printed 2017, 3 1/16 × 4 5/8"
(7.8 × 11.7 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery

The ordinary in art is in a state of permanent evolution. Each era must discover a new stratum of the banal and a manner of refining it into artistic form. The modernist programme for the ordinary was spelled out in Charles Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" in 1863. Baudelaire's artist-flâneur transfigured urban sludge, anguish and bustle by seeking communion with "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent." Armed with new apparatuses of mechanical reproduction, photographers would soon follow in the flâneur's footsteps, slicing the quotidian into "decisive moments."



1:35 a.m., in Chinatown Restaurant, New York, New York. 1965-67. Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1995, 9 × 13 1/2" (22.9 × 34.3 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery

Approximately a hundred years later, in the 1960s, the structure of the ordinary in art underwent a seismic shift. Pop art and conceptual art offered novel, anti-aesthetic depictions of the everyday. Art turned anti-art, relying on neutral relays of actuality stripped of a subjectivity that could redeem it. The ordinary suddenly resisted transfiguration. The results were as bland and bold as Warhol's Brillo Box.

The epoch brought to the everyday a radical, conceptual thrust. Images like Ed Ruscha's "no style" photographs of 26 Gasoline Stations, John Baldessari's snapshots of the back of trucks and Warhol's Polaroids continue to shock with their deliberate jettisoning of technical mastery and insistence on pure immediacy over aesthetic discrimination.

For American photography, one of the most important explorers of the ordinary came of age during this artistic era: Stephen Shore. His commanding ten-room retrospective, now on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presents hundreds of images of the commonplace captured by the photographer over the course of more than fifty years. The survey follows the chronological trajectory of Shore's career, beginning with his apprenticeship at Warhol's Factory in the mid-60s and ending with his recent trips to Ukraine and Israel. Each room is dedicated to a different creative phase of the artist, who considers a photograph "a problem to be solved."

Curated by MoMA's Quentin Bajac, the exhibition grounds Shore's work in the artistic movements of the milieu that impacted the young photographer while he worked at the Factory. In the first rooms, the survey presents over thirty of Shore's black and whites of the Factory's habitués, from Lou Reed and Nico to Marcel Duchamp, as well as Shore's experimental serial images from the late '60s, which take a sledgehammer to the conventions of art photography.

In the fourth room, we enter a new phase: Shore's neon-and-vinyl America of the 1970s, documented during his numerous cross-country trips. In 1972, Shore drove out of New York City to Amarillo, Texas with a Rollei 35mm camera, thus beginning a series that would later become known as American Surfaces. Before the end of the year, the gas-fueled ride into the dawn of America's postmodern era would encompass thousands of miles and nearly a hundred rolls of film.

A deadpan recorder of manufactured American landscapes, Shore broke with a longstanding tradition of black-and-white photography and loaded his Rollei with color film. Along with William Eggleston, Joel Sternfeld and Raghubir Singh, he pioneered the use of color for the world of fine art photography, which until then had insisted that real art only existed in shades of gray.

American Surface is a three-row grid of over two hundred 3.5x5 prints taped directly to the gallery walls, just as the images were first shown after Shore's return to New York. Viewers can animate the kaleidoscopic array of America's final analog era by walking along the grid, which begins to feel like a series of cinematic frames. Motel rooms and Formica tabletops, unmade beds and parking lots, people's faces caught by the flashbulb, a hand reaching for the radio in West Palm Beach, a wrestling match in Texas, water fountains and faux wooden panels, gas stations, diner meals and toilet bowls—all of these mark Shore's discovery of a new layer of the ordinary spawned by America's post-war consumerist culture.



Installation view of Stephen Shore. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 19, 2017–May 28, 2018. © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Robert Gerhardt

Lopsided and matter-of-fact, American Surfaces masquerades as amateurish snapshots, melding Pop Art's sensibilities with Walker Evans' "documentary" style (think, farmer's bedsteads captured with Weegee's flash). The result is a genesis of a new photographic vernacular: a flat, deadpan aesthetic that thrives on the deliberate blandness of its subject matter and a rejection of artistic conventions. Each pop of the flash is an unearthing of an artifact: a testament to the bizarreness and unrepeatability of the real in the backward glance of history.

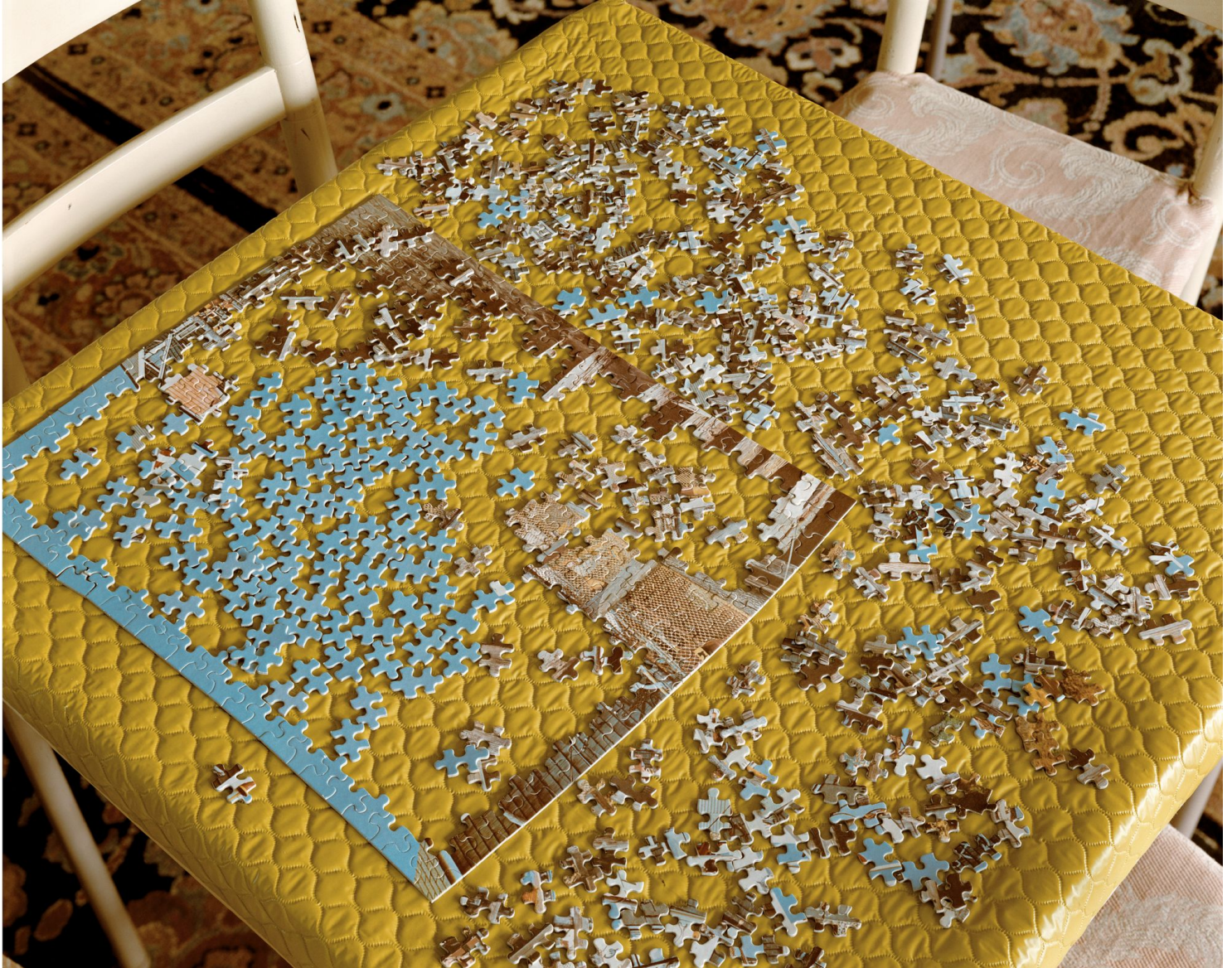
Shore's next American travel series, *Uncommon Places*, lasted into the early 80s. MoMA presents over 40 images from the cycle. Abandoning his 35mm camera and flash, Shore switched to a large-format 8x10 view camera, recording his travels in daylight with impossible precision. The view camera, with its costly film and slow setup, imposed a new set of constraints on the photographer. Image creation required discipline, exactitude and prolonged deliberation. Shore only took one picture of each subject and avoided editing these photographs later in the darkroom.



Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, printed 2013, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Thomas and Susan Dunn. © 2017 Stephen Shore

Consider his *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California* from the mid-70s. Shore's Americana—a charmless jumble of automobiles and gas stations—has been arranged into a formalist existential riddle. The verticals of the lampposts perfectly counterbalance the horizontals of shadows, signs and car roofs. Move the camera a quarter of an inch and the entire alignment crumbles. The central lamppost no longer bisects the Texaco sign without blocking its letters; the Chevron arrow stops imposing itself on the landscape like a hammer; the soft commercial colors—a McDonald's billboard, an orange car, the red of the chevrons—lose their chromatic unity amidst a forest of signage.

Products of the photographer's intense acts of looking, the images from *Uncommon Places* require prolonged concentration on the part of the viewer who must embody their solitary spaces. Large and baroque in detail, the prints emanate a sense of immediacy as if we were contemplating them from a window without expecting a message. Shore's America is a tableau arrested on the precipice of time: analytical, resistant to interpretation. Rather than point to a past that is now absent, *Uncommon Places* insists on presence, thriving in that initial instant when the visible shocks before it is domesticated by recognition.



Lookout Hotel, Ogunquit, Maine, July 16, 1974. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, printed 2013, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor.
© 2017 Stephen Shore

The exhibit displays Shore's wide artistic range with thrilling—and, at times, exhausting—inclusiveness. There are Shore's stereoscopic images, print-on-demand books, commercial and editorial commissions, even digital tablets to browse his Instagram feed. But it is the last room of images with Shore's trips to Ukraine and Israel that holds an unexpected surprise.

Journeying through the lands of his ancestors—the photographer’s Jewish grandfather came to America from Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth century—Shore documents the last living Holocaust survivors scattered across Ukrainian towns. His usual formalist detachment falters at the sight of elderly men and women living in drab Soviet apartments. The photographer places the human figure at the center of the frame, portraying the survivors and their possessions with piety and candor.

The final images in the room—curated in a separate central compartment—are the black-and-whites from Shore’s *Archaeology* series, taken at two excavation sites in 1996: Israel’s fortified city of Tel Hatzor and Ashkelon, an ancient seaport just north of Gaza destroyed in the thirteenth century. The dark, fossilized imprint of a skeletal hand in the sand reaches for a trace of an amphora, both already removed by an archaeologist. The ordinary leaves no more than an indentation in the sand before it is gone. Absence longs for absence.



Uman, Cherkaska Province, Ukraine, July 22, 2012. Chromogenic color print, printed 2017, 16 × 20" (40.6 × 50.8 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery

The stark photographs of civilization's detritus, deposited into the archaeological record, offer a key to the larger problem posed by Shore's work to the viewer. What is the force one feels irradiating from his images of parking lots, motels and chickpea-yellow automobiles? How does the ordinary become art?

Perhaps the answer lies in Shore's treatment of the fourth dimension on a flat surface. The philosopher Walter Benjamin once reminded us that "the present...comprises the entire history of mankind as an enormous abridgement." The commonplaces that Shore captured are just such abridgements. In each image, history has found its temporary terminal point, crystallizing into a final moment of presence. The now has become a still-life fossilized into photographic silver. And then, in the subsequent moment, it is archaeology.

—Lev Feigin

*Lev Feigin is a Philadelphia writer, flâneur and, occasionally, photographer. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, he holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the CUNY Graduate Center and is an alumnus of The Writers Institute at the Graduate Center. You can follow him on **Instagram** (<http://www.instagram.com/levafeigin>).*

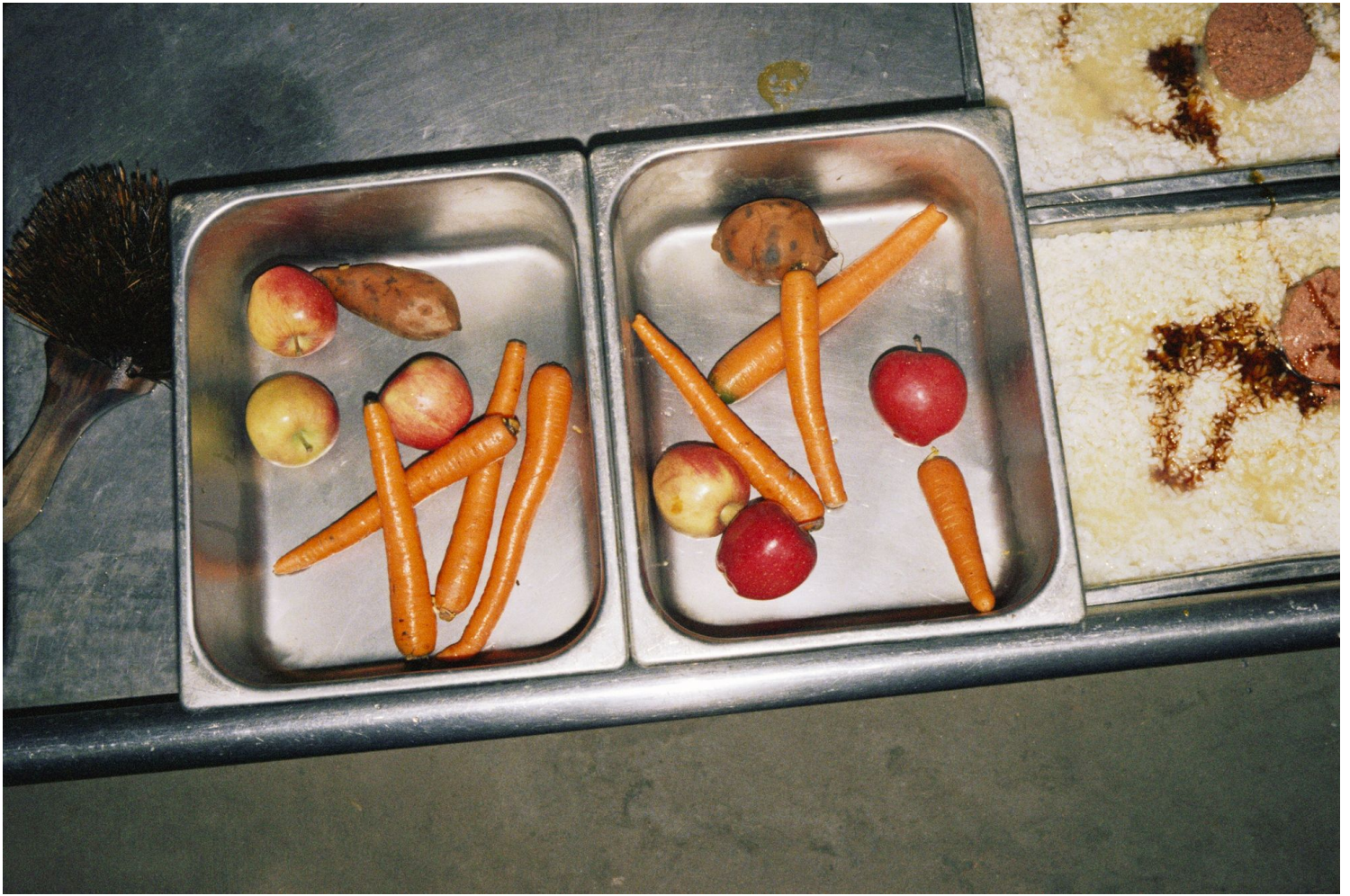
*The exhibition **Stephen Shore** (<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3769>) will run at MoMA through May 28, 2018.*



New York, New York. 1964. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/8 × 13 1/2" (23.2 × 34.3 cm).
© 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery



*Kanab, Utah, June 1972. Chromogenic color print, printed 2017, 3 1/16 × 4 5/8" +
(7.8 × 11.7 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery*



Washington, D.C., November 1972. Chromogenic color print, printed 2017, 1/16 × 4 5/8" (7.8 × 11.7 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery +



*2nd Street, Ashland, Wisconsin, July 9, 1973. Chromogenic color print, printed
2017, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery*

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U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973. Chromogenic color print, printed 2002, 17 3/4 x 21 15/16" (45.1 x 55.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Photography Council Fund. © 2017 Stephen Shore





Breakfast, Trail's End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973. Chromogenic color print, 16 7/8 × 21 1/4" (42.8 × 54 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 2017 Stephen Shore

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West 3rd Street, Parkersburg, West Virginia, May 16, 1974. Chromogenic color print, 8 × 10 1/2" (20.3 × 26.7 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery

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West 9th Avenue, Amarillo, Texas, October 2, 1974. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, printed 2013, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor. © 2017 Stephen Shore

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Stephen Shore. *U.S. 93, Wikieup, Arizona, December 14, 1976*. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Thomas and Susan Dunn. © 2017 Stephen Shore



*Giverny, France, 1977. Chromogenic color print, 7 11/16 x 9 5/8" (19.5 x 24.5 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Estate of Lila Acheson Wallace.
© 2017 Stephen Shore*





Graig Nettles, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, March 1, 1978. Chromogenic color print, 7 11/16 x 9 11/16" (19.5 x 24.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired with matching funds from Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1978. © 2017 Stephen Shore +



Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, 35 7/8 x 44 15/16" (91.2 x 114.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 2017 Stephen Shore +



Gallatin County, Montana, August 2, 1983. Chromogenic color print, printed 2017, 36 × 45" (91.4 × 114.3 cm). © 2017 Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery +



*County of Sutherland, Scotland, 1988. Chromogenic color print, 35 1/2 × 45 1/2" +
(90.2 × 115.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Susan and Arthur
Fleischer, Jr. © 2017 Stephen Shore*



Sderot, Israel, September 14, 2009. Chromogenic color print, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 2017 Stephen Shore



Peqi'in, Israel, September 22, 2009. Chromogenic color print, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 2017 Stephen Shore +



Isaak Bakmayev's Medals, Berdichev, Zhytomyrska Province, Ukraine, July 29, 2012. Chromogenic color print, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 2017 Stephen Shore

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Installation view of Stephen Shore. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 19, 2017–May 28, 2018. © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Robert Gerhardt





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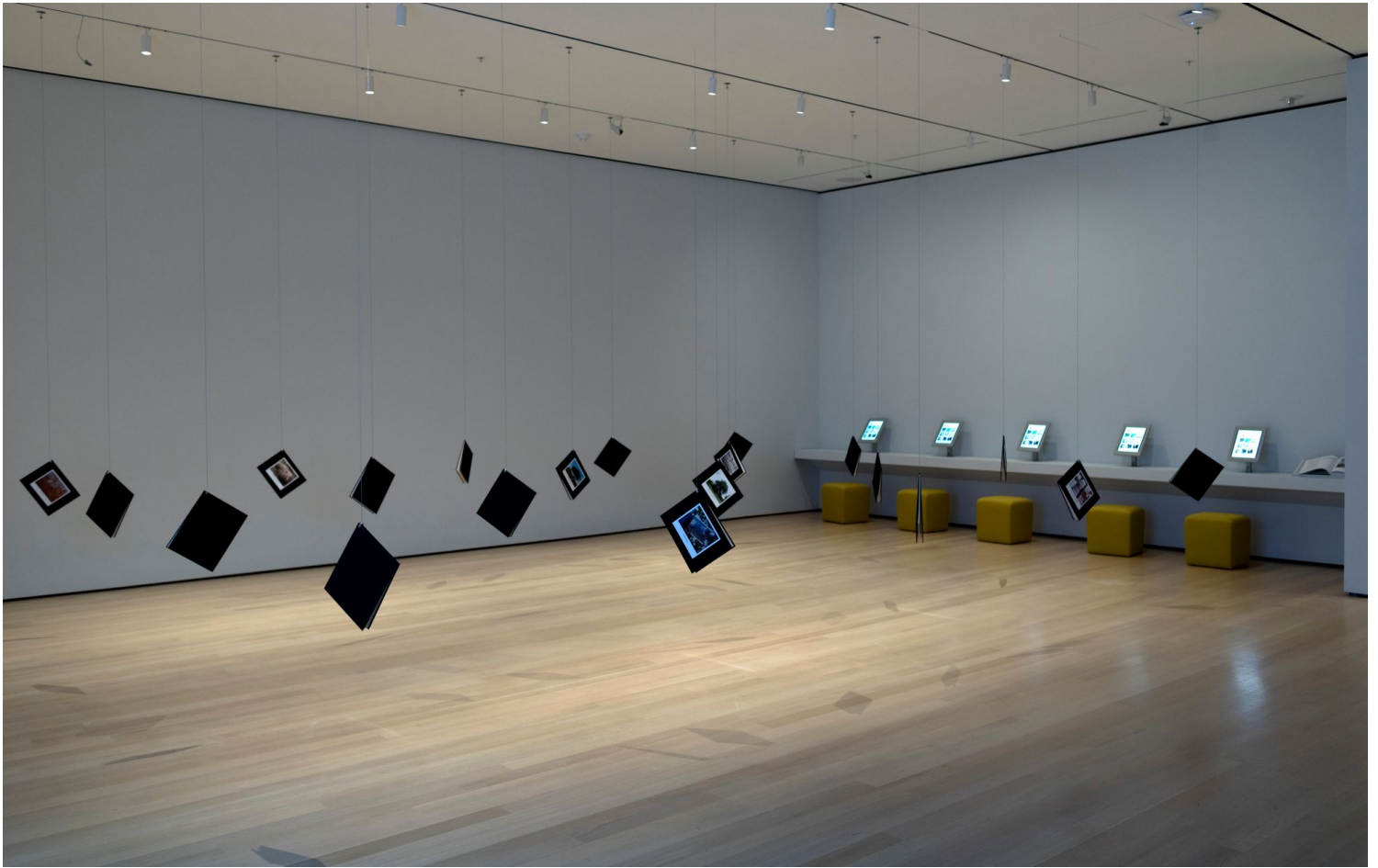
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