

A conversation with Stephen Shore

This year's Photo London's Master of Photography talks to fellow US artist Alec Soth (who also takes his portrait)



Stephen Shore © Alec Soth

Alec Soth MAY 10, 2019

Alec Soth I wanted to start with a stupid question but it's a stupid question that I have to deal with. You're sitting on a plane, and the person next to you, they say, "What do you do?" You say you're a photographer, and then comes that next question: "What do you take pictures of?" I wondered if you have any advice for me. What do you say?

Stephen Shore I say I've been doing it for so long that I've wound up taking pictures of everything.

AS And that's it?

SS Yes.

AS But then they'll say, "Do you photograph for magazines or do you photograph for...?" Most people don't have any concept of what a fine-art photographer is. They're thinking nature photography or sports photography. Do you just change the subject?

SS No one's ever asked a follow-up question like that.



AS Really? I get it all the time. So you don't struggle with this issue the way I do?

SS No, I would struggle with it if someone had to pin me down about *what* I photograph, but I'm telling the truth. Maybe if your hair were grey, people would believe you more. They'd say, "Oh God, he's done it a long time..." I do sometimes say I do it as a fine art. And so that they understand what I mean, I say I exhibit in galleries and museums.

AS What age do you think you first said, “I am a photographer”?

SS Probably 10.

AS Didn’t you want to be a baseball player before that or something else?

SS It’s always been photography. There wasn’t anything that interested me particularly before that. I started doing darkroom work when I was six.

AS I hope you wore gloves.

SS I didn’t. This was at a more primitive age, and my fingers were cracked from the fixer. My fingernails were dark and the skin on my fingers had big fissures in it.

AS How did you find yourself in a darkroom at age six?

SS I had an uncle who was an engineer who gave me a Kodak darkroom set for my sixth birthday, and it had a little instruction pamphlet. It had hard plastic trays and a developing tank and little packets of chemicals that were paper on the outside and foil-lined on the inside, and you’d tear and you’d mix it. And I followed the instructions. I wasn’t taking pictures then. I was just using my family’s Kodak snapshots. And then, I guess I was eight, I got a 35mm camera.

AS You said someone gave you a Walker Evans book. When was that?

SS I was 10.

AS As a father of a 12-year-old, the thought of any of this happening is pretty remarkable.

SS I feel very lucky. I feel lucky that my uncle gave me the darkroom. And lucky that I lived in an apartment building in New York and our upstairs neighbour was a music publisher. He was a very cultured person, obviously, and knowing of my interest in photography he gave me [Walker Evans’] *American Photographs*, which was the first photography book I ever looked at. I lucked out.

AS And then, at age 17 or whatever it was, how did you end up at the Factory with Warhol?

SS I was a senior in high school but had pretty much stopped going to school. I hadn’t officially dropped out, but I just wasn’t attending and I was involved in the classical music scene in New York. I got a job as a photographer for an orchestra and I was going to a couple of concerts a week and going to films every day. And I made a small film. It was shown at a theatre called the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque.

AS What was the film?

SS It was called *Elevator*; it was shot inside of an old cage elevator. It was shown the same night that Warhol premiered a film of his called *The Life of Juanita Castro*, and I was introduced to him afterwards. This was maybe February of 1965, and in ’65 he was very famous in New York. This was a couple of years after the soup cans and Brillo boxes.



Andy Warhol, the Factory, New York, New York, 1965 © Stephen Shore

AS So he saw your movie?

SS Yes.

AS And he liked it?

SS He never said. But I asked if I could come to the Factory and he said yes.

AS Amazing.

SS I started going every day, and at that point, I realised I couldn't maintain the fiction that I was a student and told my parents I was dropping out of high school.

AS How did they take that?

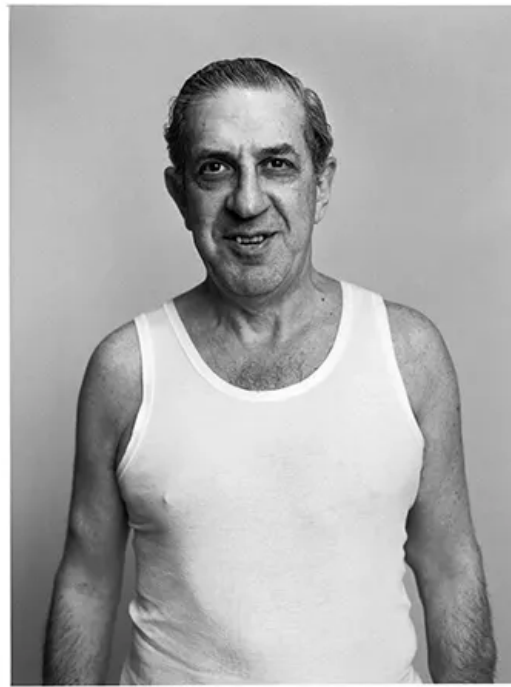
SS They weren't happy. On the other hand, Warhol was famous, and I would have parties at home – I was still living with my parents – and Andy would come to their apartment, and the Velvet Underground.

AS *The Velvet Underground came to your parents' house?*

SS Yes. One evening, my mother befriended Nico and they spent the whole evening in the kitchen. My mother gave her milk and matzos and Nico told my mother her life story. And then my parents would take Seconals and close their bedroom door and go to sleep. And in the morning there were probably a few people who had passed out and my mother would insist on making them breakfast.



Ruth Shore and Fred Shore (Stephen Shore's parents), both 1970 © Stephen Shore



AS How old were your parents at that time?

SS If I was 17, they were in their late fifties.

AS Wow, that's very tolerant of them.

SS I think they just sort of gave up and thought "OK".

AS Amazing. They died young, your parents?

SS Yes. Well, they were 40 years older than me, to begin with, so they died young by modern standards, but they were in their late sixties. They died relatively early in my life.

AS Regarding Warhol, did you idolise him or did you just look up to him? Did you identify with him in any sort of way?

SS No, I didn't identify with him. I loved what he was doing as an artist. The main thing was that it was exciting. It felt like you were at the centre of things.

AS I get the sense that you were very ambitious early on.

SS Which was also why I left...

AS Left New York?

SS No, left Warhol. I was there for three years. There was no falling out, I just needed to get on with my life, and I saw people who I felt were going to look back at the Factory as the highlight of their lives and were going to live in that time, and that felt yucky to me. I needed to move on.

AS To have the wherewithal to know that at that age, it's impressive.

SS What about you? How did you get involved in photography?

AS When I was 10 I was just a weird kid. I had imaginary friends and a whole fantasy life. I kind of lived far away from other people, so I played by myself.

SS Were you in Minnesota?

AS I was in Minnesota and I was in the country. I was a weirdo and didn't know what to do with it, really. And then, in high school, I had the right art teacher and he said, "Hey, maybe you could apply that to this...", and "this" was painting and then sculpture and one thing led to another.

But that brings me to another question for you. With this exposure to Warhol and his universe, I wondered if you wanted to identify yourself primarily as an artist in the beginning? I know that you felt a connection to Ed Ruscha and conceptual work. Did you want to come in that way or as a photographer?

SS When I started working at the Factory I was a photographer from a very traditional photography background. But what happened there was that I saw an artist working. I started thinking about the kinds of decisions he was making, his use of serial imagery, and my exposure to him and some of his friends opened a door to a broader aesthetic thinking, which was then what I pursued when I left.

After leaving the Factory, Shore spent a year working with his father, an investor on Wall Street, then returned to photography. In 1971, he was given the first one-man show by a living photographer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. During the early 1970s, he worked on a series he called "American Surfaces". The idea was to make a visual diary of his everyday existence.

AS Would you say that *American Surfaces* started almost as a quasi-conceptual project, with the road-trip diary and all the notations?

SS *American Surfaces* came out of a couple of things at the same time. One was an idea of doing a diary but out of repeated subjects, so it wasn't strictly conceptual, but I photographed every meal, every bed, every television set, every person I encountered. But I had other interests as well, which was I wanted to take a picture that felt *natural*, that felt like seeing and didn't feel like picture-making. So, that was on my mind.

AS That's interesting, because you're thought of as this great formalist who's fixated on picture-making, but you started out in this conceptual vein.



July 22-23, 1969, 1969 © Stephen Shore

SS Yes.

AS Something I haven't been able to figure out – I've read about you not having a driver's licence or not knowing how to drive. I just don't understand how this worked.

SS I did a lot of conceptual work in Texas in '69 and '70, and in those years I wasn't driving. I would fly out to Amarillo and stay with friends. But *American Surfaces* was the year – or maybe it was the year after – I got a driver's licence. So for *American Surfaces*, I was driving across country. I guess if you grow up in the country in Minnesota you think how does someone wind up being 24 and not driving. But if you grow up in Manhattan...

AS Sure. But it seems like you had this almost European understanding of America. There are all these Europeans – for me, I always think of Wim Wenders dreaming of America and the cross-country journey.

SS It's interesting you say that because a lot of the famous cross-country trips in photography and in literature were done by outsiders. There's the cross-country trip in *Lolita* that's so beautifully described. There is Cartier-Bresson in the late '40s, he makes an incredible trip that in many ways pre-figures some of Robert Frank's work. Then there is of course Frank, and even Kerouac – although he was born in Massachusetts, his family was French-Canadian, and he didn't speak English until he was six. So a lot of these famous cross-country trips were made by outsiders or foreigners.

AS Over this period, *American Surfaces* bleeds into *Uncommon Places*. Was there an overlap period between the two?

"Uncommon Places" is Shore's best-known series of large-format colour landscape photographs, taken while driving across the country between 1973 and 1978. It has been published in various formats and expanded editions since its first publication in 1982.

SS There is an overlap period in '73, and it was really simple. I wanted to show *American Surfaces* as snapshots: unmatted, unframed, pasted on the wall. But as time went on, I became less interested in the cultural reference of the snapshot and more interested in what the image was doing and the exploration of the country I was engaged in, and I wanted larger prints. But Kodacolor, which was the 35mm film then, was a very grainy film. It just didn't hold up to enlargement. So I needed a larger negative, and the only medium-format cameras I knew at the time were 2.25in square, which I didn't want, so I got a Crown Graphic just to get a larger negative.

I thought I was going to handhold it, but if I was photographing a building there was no reason to, so I put it on a tripod and I found that I just loved working on a tripod, and I loved looking at the image on the ground glass. So the next year I bought an 8x10in. The camera kind of led to the journey, in a way: the deliberateness that is inevitable with an 8x10 led to that journey into...

AS A different kind of seeing...

SS Yes, and the formalism you talked about. But I want to say something else. By the end of the '70s, I had started taking pictures *intentionally* that were as simple as *American Surfaces*. So I feel it's sort of like a spiral, that I start here and go deep into formal complexity and then come out of it to a similar point, but at a different level.



Breakfast, Trail's End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973, 1973 © Stephen Shore

AS There's this one point that I'm really fixated on, and it's in the editing of *Uncommon Places*. Because the way I see it is that you had this conceptual background and then you got formal, and you were mixing those two things, and then in this book there's the [picture of the] pancakes and [the portrait of] Ginger, and I read somewhere that you said, "Maybe I shouldn't have kept those in because it could have been more rigorous."

SS No, it was actually the opposite, but it's sort of right. What it was, I think, the original edit didn't have them in, the original edit that Carole Kismaric who was the editor of it did. And I just insisted. I understood that they were different from all the other pictures in certain ways, but I just couldn't imagine a book without them.

AS So, that decision right there...

SS Let me say something else. In *American Surfaces*, there are portraits, there are details, there's architecture, occasional landscapes. *Uncommon Places*: exactly the same, in almost the same proportion; a little less portrait, simply because, as you've demonstrated, it's a lot harder to do a portrait with an 8x10 than it is with a 35mm. But there were a lot of portraits. There were details. It was the same thing, in a way. There was maybe greater emphasis on architecture and intersections because, as I got interested in certain formal questions, like how space works in a picture, I would sometimes gravitate to certain subjects because [the world] was the laboratory. So the original edit

emphasised more the architecture and the intersections and took it away from the actual balance that was in the work between the different kinds of pictures.



Ginger Shore, Flagler Street, Miami, Florida, November 12, 1977, 1977 (Ginger is Shore's wife) © Stephen Shore

AS The reason I feel so strongly about this is it's those pictures within the context of all your other pictures that make them just *Bam!* I'm not sucking up to you to say it was the thing, for me. I saw them and I thought *I want to do that*. To me, it's where that road divides from Lewis Baltz and that super-rigorous way of seeing. Thank God you put those pictures in, is all I have to say. How different it would have been.

SS I want to add one other thing about conceptualism. Because I came to it from photography, I thought that there could always be a visual element. I did an early series on Sixth Avenue, where I took a picture at the beginning of each block facing due north from 42nd Street to 59th Street. But I was still choosing the moment and who's in the picture. And I shot it on infrared film, and it's a bright sunny day, so it all looks blown-out. It looks like after a nuclear explosion.

AS When did you do this?

SS '70. So I was always interested in the visual element at the same time. And I think that's maybe why I have an affinity to the Bechers [the work of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher], because they were talked about as conceptualists but what was the concept? "I'm going to photograph water towers?" That's not much of a concept. You can see people picking up the [Bechers'] *Water Towers* book, opening it randomly, and there are 400 pictures of water towers in there. But they don't get it until they actually go into the picture and take it as visual information and enter it in a traditional photographic way.

AS There's always this term, "artist using photography", and it's almost like "photographers using art". It would be interesting to think of which photographers that would be. The Bechers' students [such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer] kind of all fit that model. Paul Graham is in that category. It's an interesting sphere, coming at it that way.

AS There's a story about you with Ansel Adams. You know what I'm getting at?

SS Yes. The story you're referring to is that one of my closest friends at the time was a curator named Weston Naef, and he had a loft in SoHo. He invited me to dinner one night with Ansel Adams. This is in maybe the mid-1970s. Ansel had been, in fact, very helpful to me without my knowing it. *Uncommon Places* came about because I had a show in '76 at MoMA and he saw it and came back with his editor at New York Graphic Society, named Tim Hill, and suggested they do a book. That's how *Uncommon Places* happened.



Broad Street, Regina, Saskatchewan, August 17, 1974, 1974 © Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

I remember early in the evening, Weston had on his wall a picture by Carleton Watkins and it was a print of a *Yucca draconis*, which is a tall, branching yucca plant. In the picture there was a branch of the yucca intersecting the horizon behind it, and Ansel looked at it and said, "If you took it you would have lowered the camera." And I said, "You're right." Because it bothered both of us that he missed that. Ansel had been drinking before I got there, and while I was there he had six glasses of straight vodka – a prodigious amount of vodka – and at one point he said, "I had a creative hot streak in the '40s, and since then, I've been pot-boiling." And I thought, when I'm 85 that's not how I want to look back at my life.

A number of the very best photographers had relatively short productive periods. The people who had long productive periods tend to fall into two categories. The first are those who had an overwhelming and often documentary vision, like the Bechers, like Atget, maybe Sander. And then there are people who reinvent themselves in the best possible way, like Stieglitz, like Harry Callahan. I knew that, by temperament, I was in the latter category, and so that was on my mind.

AS You were clearly in the latter category because by 25 you'd already been through so many phases.

SS Exactly. And this process interests me. I have been rereading the Leslie Katz interview with Walker Evans [in *Art in America*, 1971] where Katz says: "Millions of people feel they're performing an instinctual act when they take a snapshot. What distinguishes what they do from a photograph of yours?" And Evans answers and he is basically saying, "My photographs are transcendent."

He says he knows it sounds pretentious, but he says, "if I'm satisfied that something transcendent shows in a photograph I've done, that's it. It's there. I've done it."

Evans goes on to say that "it's a very exciting, heady thing. It happens more when you're younger, but it still happens, or I wouldn't continue. I think there is a period of aesthetic discovery that happens to a man and he can do all sorts of things at white heat."

AS Thinking about you with Ansel Adams – when my career was just starting to take off I did an assignment where I was photographing a famous artist. I didn't want to bug him, but I had this one burning question. I was starting to travel all the time and I had a young child and I knew that he had five children. I said, "How do you do it? How do you manage all this?" And he said, "I just got separated." Being in Magnum over the years, being exposed to different photographers, it's not a pretty picture of what it does. But you held it together.

SS I don't take road trips.

AS It does seem like something changed in your work [in the mid-1980s] when you were in Montana, and Hudson Valley. Was that part of it? Parenting?



Putnam County, New York, 1985, 1985 © Stephen Shore

SS Yes. I would do trips, but they were much shorter. I wasn't going away for two or three months; I was going away for a couple of weeks. Although, thinking about it, my son was born in '88. So I started doing landscapes in the '80s and I did three trips to Texas where I'd go away for a few weeks, and sometimes my wife would come with me. Then, after my son was born, I did one trip to Scotland and he was six months old and he came along. My wife, being a good sport, took care of him all day and I went out and took pictures. But I was never going to do it again. Just being married meant I wasn't going to go away for three months again.

AS It's interesting, because you were so ambitious, but you didn't sacrifice family for that.

SS Well, there were other changes. It was about the same time I got married that *Uncommon Places* wound down. I remember being in Georgia and setting up at an intersection in downtown Savannah and realising that I knew exactly where to stand, and I could do it very quickly, and the picture was *absolutely perfect* and absolutely boring. And I remembered Ansel. I thought, OK, this is the time. Now I find myself copying myself and I can do a Stephen Shore without thinking, and that's not of any interest to me.

The simple thing to say then would be that I started doing landscapes. But the reality is that there was a period of having to re-establish what I was doing in between.

AS You'd always done landscapes, but those pictures were super stripped-down, particularly in Montana. I was so crazy about them, they were like Ellsworth Kellys [minimalist colour-field paintings] or something. They're so formal. So that feels like a cleansing period, in a way. But you didn't photograph your family. That's what happens to so many people. They have a baby and then they do the family project. You were never tempted by that?

SS Much to my wife's regret. I don't think of photography as a way of remembering an event, and so she has to remind me: "It's your son's birthday. Take a picture."

AS I'm in completely the same category. I've wanted to do that kind of work and I've tried to do it at various points, but it just doesn't work for me. It's not natural.

But at this point were you being tagged as an "American/Americana" kind of person, too?

SS Yes. When I stopped doing *Uncommon Places* and started doing landscapes, there were a couple of dealers who dropped me.

AS Is that right?

SS They would have been happy if I'd just done the same work over and over again.

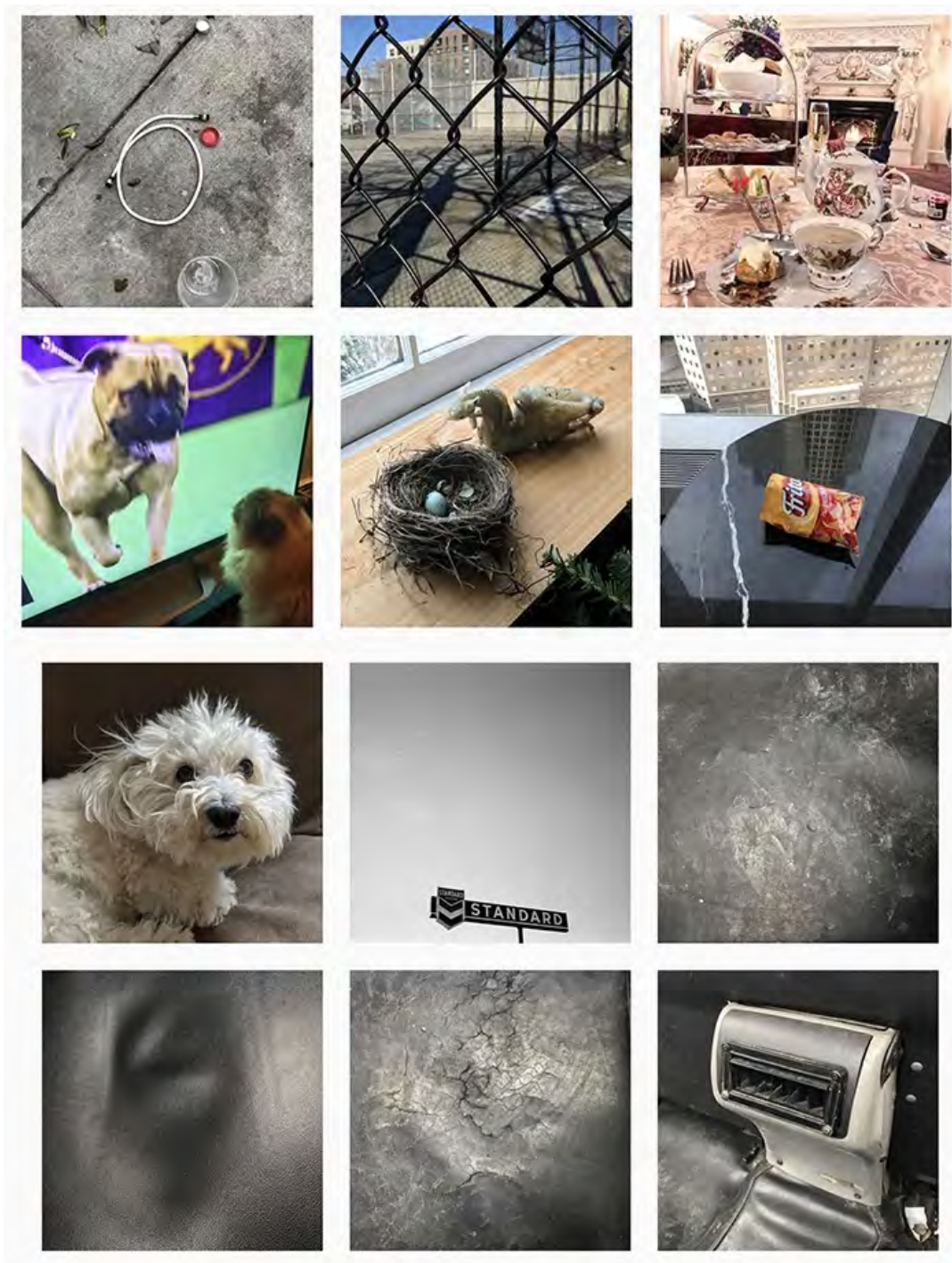
AS I suppose the art market was different then, though, so the stakes weren't quite as high. And you were teaching.

SS That is true, yes. That's when I started teaching, in '82.

AS So you've always been doing this experimentation in between things. There's the iBooks, and you've talked about the infrared pictures, which I didn't know about. And this leads us on to phone usage. Yesterday, before coming here, I decided I was going to need to ask questions that other people are interested in, so I asked my intern, "What do you want to ask Stephen Shore?" She wrote down three questions, and they were all about Instagram. She wanted to know how things change when you're shooting on your phone, and particularly when you have an audience in mind. She asked whether the photos can be understood the same way as when experienced in a book or on a gallery wall. Or is it necessary for them to be displayed on a screen?

SS I haven't seen them on a gallery wall. There was one book done [in 2015] of my whole Instagram feed up to that point, and I think it worked pretty much the same, because a book can have a way of de-emphasising an individual picture.

One of the things that interested me about Instagram is that you can make notational photographs with it that are not pictures meant to stand alone. There's something about the medium, the size of it, the quantity, maybe, that reminds me of the [Polaroid] SX70. If you just look at the SX70 pictures done in 1975, people would look at the light hitting the glass and they'd make a picture. And the SX70 is the same size as a square Instagram picture on a larger iPhone, and it's used the same way. Though not by everyone – there are people who promote their pottery on Instagram. But the standard kind of Instagram picture is very similar to the SX70.



Stephen Shore's Instagram feed

AS Do you think about the audience with Instagram, or are you just having fun making notational pictures?

SS I notice how many likes they'll get. I posted something yesterday that I knew wasn't going to get a lot and it got 800, and I know that if I did a picture of my cat I would get thousands, but that's not why I do it. I notice the likes, but I don't gear to the likes. But I do gear to the size. I gear the pictures to what they look like on the phone. And I'm taking pictures with Instagram in mind, so I'm taking it thinking, "This is something I'm going to post."

There's a new series of pictures I'm showing in London this month, which I started about a half a year before my show at MoMA went up in the fall of 2017. As it was approaching I started getting this sinking feeling. And across the hall from me in New York is a man who's the head of the New

York Studio School and he is also a painter. One day we're riding down the elevator together and he said, "Are you surviving this?" And I said, yes, and he said, "Good". Because if you're not an artist you think [having a major exhibition] is just the greatest thing ever. But an artist knows that then there's the question of what do you do next? So I thought the way to deal with it was to start a new project before the show even went up. This was about three months after the Hasselblad X1D came out and I got one. [The Hasselblad X1D is a lightweight medium-format digital camera with an electronic viewfinder.]

With Instagram, I'd probably spent too much time photographing just stupid stuff on the ground. I have these two little dogs I walk every day, so I'm often looking down. The X1D is a lot more cumbersome than a phone but because it's touchscreen, I feel like I can almost take the same pictures I'm doing with my phone. So, I was doing these pictures with the X1D and blowing them up huge, and the quality is amazing. That was my last gallery show and I'm still working on it.



New York, New York, May 19, 2017, 2017 © Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York



Three Forks, Montana, August 6, 2017, 2017 © Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

What about you? How much time do you spend thinking about Instagram? You use it more as a scrapbook, in a way...

AS The evolution for me was originally I had a blog and I really enjoyed it. I had just had my second child and I knew I was going to be home a bit, and I wanted to engage with photography and this was a way to do it. And then Facebook killed blogs, basically. When Facebook came along, I was like, I can't do it. I can't say, "Will you be my friend?" It was off-putting to me, so I avoided it. And then – I have this site called Little Brown Mushroom for the publishing world and the guy who worked for me said, "You've got to be on [Instagram] just for promotional purposes." I get on there, and instantly I'm super-interested and something kicks in. At first, it was to play with it and just

figure out it out and then I started using it in different ways. It's a little bit run its course for me now, but I got fascinated with it, for sure.

What I see is that photography has morphed into *conversation*, in a way. It's like you're have a casual conversation with somebody and it dissolves. Most of those Instagram pictures are just dissolving into the ether, and that's OK. You can make pictures that are going to last, and you can have [pictures that are like] a conversation, and they're two separate things. I'm curious about it, still.

AS Now this is the selfish part. I want to talk about the things I'm most interested for myself. I guess it is sort of stage-of-life stuff and it has more to do with spiritual matters. I've always associated you with eastern thought. One of the other things that made me so inspired by *Uncommon Places* early on was the fly-fishing passage in the back. It's as if you're talking to the person reading the book and saying, "Be aware of the sounds of the room, the space around you," which could be a description of mindfulness or Zen seeing. So I'm wondering if that [spirituality] was a part of your life in any way or not?

SS Yes. The original *Uncommon Places* begins with a quote from [the architect] Louis Sullivan about attention. He talks about the art of seeing, the art of listening, and then ends by saying – and this is the part I cut out – that our spiritual nature is just a finer way of seeing and listening. And I'm sorry now that I cut it out because I think it's exactly to the point.

It's something I'm completely comfortable talking about at this stage in my life, but there was a period where I didn't want to play up the spiritual thing. I thought some people were going to be put off by it and other people were going to be attracted to it in a weird way that I'm not comfortable with. I don't know if it's eastern tradition, but there's something about the spiritual that is gauzy and mystical, and there's also something that has to do with paying attention. And that if you pay attention, then something tends to accrue in you over time.

AS I can see why you would be apprehensive, particularly in that sort of hippy-dippy era. Were you reading that kind of stuff secretly?

SS Yes.

AS OK. Now I actually want to talk about fishing.

SS Do you fish?

AS I don't. A few years ago I wrote a letter to my teenage self, just as an experiment, and the biggest piece of advice I gave myself was: *more hobbies*. I think hobbies are the best thing in the world, because you can pursue a hobby with joy and not stake your whole identity on it. When did fishing come into your life?

SS My wife introduced me to it. My wife grew up in Maryland and an uncle of hers taught her to fish. When we met, I was spending time with some friends in the Catskills and she said, "You know,

you're right across the street from a very famous trout river." And I had no idea. It was a river called the Willowemoc. So I started fishing it and then I became obsessed, and we did things like when we left the city we moved out west and spent three months fishing.

AS And I'm sure very early on you made the connection to photography.

SS Yes.



Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California, August 13, 1979

AS I've used fishing as this analogy for photography for a long time, because photography, like fishing, is this super-accessible hobby. For most people, it functions as a hobby. And if you're a fisherperson and you decide "I want to be a professional fisherperson," that's so stupid.

SS Even stupider than being a professional photographer.

AS Exactly. You're basically saying, "I'm going to kill the joy of this thing." You've got to get big nets and you're just hauling in fish or pictures. And then it's, "OK, I'm going to be a really serious fisherperson and I'm going to catch a great one and I'm going to mount it on my wall and show people..." And maybe two or three people are interested.

SS At least serious trout fishermen or fisherwomen don't kill their fish. I heard that there was a Chinese tradition of fishing with a fly without a hook, and that what you were doing was just attracting the fish.

AS Believe it or not, I can spin out the metaphor. There were these books like *Zen in the Art of Photography*, and if you were going to be a real Zen photographer you wouldn't put film in the

camera. It's something about the possessing of it and wanting to share it with others. I wonder if something like Instagram is like [the fishing practice of] catch and release...

SS I like that idea. That's very good.

AS But now, don't you worry about the thing you put on the wall that's for an art audience? Does that stress you out? Does it have to be a *really good* fish?

SS It doesn't stress me out. There's this funny place [inside me] where I know it's going on the wall, but I'm taking it for myself at the same time. The main thing is to do what interests me but it is still destined for a wall. Does that make sense to you?

AS Yes.

SS I imagine someone could worry about that, about which is which. But I don't.

AS I do worry about it more, for whatever reason. And this kind of leads into the last thing that I want to talk about, which is the opposite of this dissolving of self; it is the role of ego and biography in the work. When you're young, it fuels the work a lot. But even in those few pictures of friends and family you have early on, you can see you start emptying out that material. Are you sceptical of work that deals with the ego or is it just not your bag?

SS It's not my bag. But there's something else I thought of. People doing straight photography, the kind of photography we're doing, are outward-facing. They're engaged in the world. But Tim Davis, who is a photographer and a poet, said to me, "Think how many poets have committed suicide in the past 100 years. And how many photographers?" You can name three or, in the past century, probably two: Diane Arbus and Francesca Woodman. What he is saying is there's something about photography. It's not necessarily that the discipline is good for your physical health, but having an active engagement in making sense out of this thing that is outside of yourself, that tends to attract people who have pretty good mental health.

AS Well, you're talking to the wrong guy about that. I'm a wildly inward-looking person; that's the way I go. We were talking about when I was a 10-year-old – I just couldn't be more inward-looking.

SS But your photographs, particularly your photographs of people, are so sensitive. You're making contact with another person outside [of yourself].

AS Absolutely. And, frustratingly, I've also learnt that the key to the work, the only way I survive, is by going out. It's this battle between in and out that I'm struggling with. But I see you so clearly as a going-out-into-the world person, but I also think there's this biographical, ego content embedded really deep, almost like the spiritual matter is. This issue of your parents dying, and leaving, and going out on the road; that's got to be in the work.

SS Oh yes. Although when I look back at that period, I think it's just in my nature to take the events of life and somehow plough ahead. The couple of years after my parents died are the most productive years I've had. I think that's how I dealt with it. I couldn't do anything about it. I was not going to rematerialise them.

AS But you didn't go into a room and close yourself in, which is the poet route.

SS Exactly. The route I took was to get in the car and drive and spend all day taking pictures.

AS Yes, that's great. There's some life advice right there. That's good

SS Well, about 15 years ago, I get in the taxi and the guy starts telling me his life story. He's divorced, and he has a three-year-old daughter, and he brings women home and they see he has a daughter and they leave him, and on and on. We stop at a red light and he shrugs and says, "So, what's your philosophy of life?" I had never formulated one but I had to think on my feet – or on my ass, as I was sitting there – and say something to him, because he'd just spilled his guts out. And I said, I guess it's don't be upset about things you have no control over.

AS Wow. That kind of has to be the end of the interview, right? Is there anything else you want to share? Anything you want to get off your chest?

Pause.

SS I'd like to go back to something I said when you came in. I think a lot of artists or photographers who have had long careers have to face the question: "How do you deal with reanimating your work?" I know you're in the process of doing it and it's something that I've been through a number of times. I wondered what thoughts you had about it. How conscious are you of being strategic about it? Is it baffling to you at some point, and then you're working [your way] out of it?

AS I get the sense that you are solving problems: you create a new problem for yourself and then you solve it – not just a visual problem; a complex set of problems. But because I'm more inward-looking, I tend to work out of whatever given emotional state I'm in. So it's a bit unpredictable. I've had to abandon long-term projects because of it. I'll be in some elevated state of mind, or some desperate state of mind, and then it shifts, and I can't sustain it.

You were talking about the time in your life when you had your children and you were travelling less. At that phase in my life, my work changed in certain ways. I have zero interest in satisfying the marketplace. I'm aware of it, but sometimes I'm responding against it and I have to be careful that I'm not just responding against it to respond against it.

I've returned to the view camera [after using smaller, medium-format and 35mm cameras] because, although there was a part of me that wanted to photograph things that move and the large-format was limited, I love the view camera, and I'm allowed to work with it also.

SS Yes, the 8x10 is unique as a tool.



Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974, 1974 © Stephen Shore, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

AS The reason I first got into it is that I was working my way making pictures through my twenties, and I thought, why is it all these photographers – and very different kinds of photographers, you and Sally Mann couldn't be more different – use the view camera? Why was I attracted to something about these pictures? Even without seeing it in real life, I can feel this quality. So I tried it, and it's like magic. There's the detail and all that stuff, and now digital cameras have much more detail. But it's the rendering of space for me. The way that 300mm lens deals with space is incredible. It's just so palpable.

SS And another part of it is – and this gets to what you were saying earlier about a more philosophical or meditative approach – it's the only camera, if you're standing close enough to use the rising front and to focus, you can't see the whole image. It's the only camera made where you can't see the image when you're making important decisions.

So, to make a successful picture, I see some students, when they first use it, their pictures look schizophrenic, like they're making a decision looking just here and forget how it's affecting the rest of the picture. Or some people impose a heavy structure to the whole thing to organise it. But the way you and I both use it, where the structure feels organic, requires, even if it's not conscious, a conceptualisation of the image.

Also, just saying that leads to me thinking of something else related to what you're talking about, which is a term I use a lot and other photographers use, and that is *transparency*. Our pictures are not obviously about the decisions we're making, but the idea is that as careful as we are in our decisions, you see through them to something else, and that may relate to the ego stance in relation to the world.

AS OK. Give me your London story.

SS So, my first experience in London, I spent a month there in 1968 and I didn't know anyone. The only introduction I had was from Warhol, who gave me an introduction to his gallerist, a guy named Robert Fraser.

AS That's a good introduction.

SS Robert Fraser was very connected in those days, and through him I got to meet lots of people, and got to smoke with George Harrison and Brian Jones. I would hang out with Brian a good bit.

AS Unbelievable.

SS One night, we were wandering around London at like two in the morning and found ourselves in front of St James's Palace, and there were these guards who were standing there rigid and they can't blink their eyes. This guard is 25 years old, and this is a Rolling Stone in front of him, who says, "I'm Brian Jones." It's two in the morning. No one's around. And the guy would not blink.

London in '68 was fabulous. Then the following year I went back. I stayed three months and it's the rare year that I haven't gone back since. That was 50 years ago.

SS Oh, they want us to do a picture together.

AS Oh, do they?

SS Yes.

AS OK. You'll be in charge of that.

SS I'll be in charge of that. We'll just do it.

AS All right. I can now officially turn this off.



Alec Soth and Stephen Shore

Stephen Shore is the Photo London 2019 Master of Photography; a special presentation of his work is at the Fair at Somerset House, May 16-19; photolondon.org.