Accounting for Days

LYNNE TILLMAN ON STEPHEN SHORE’S ROAD TRIP JOURNAL

ALONG THE WAY TO TEXAS... I found myself reflecting on my life, my work, and my relationships. The experience was both exhilarating and exhausting. I often felt like I was on a roller coaster, with moments of joy and moments of despair. But despite the ups and downs, I was grateful for the experience and the opportunity to see the world in a new light.

I was particularly struck by the way Stephen Shore used his camera to capture the essence of a place, to capture the moment in time. His photographs were not just a record of what was in front of him, but a record of his experience of the place. And I wondered if I could do the same thing with my writing.

I decided to take a break from my writing and go for a walk. The air was crisp and the sky was a deep blue. I walked along the river, listening to the sounds of the water and the birds. I felt a sense of peace and calm, and I knew that this was what I needed.

I returned to my writing, but with a new perspective. I tried to capture the essence of what I was feeling, to convey the moment in time. And I found that I was able to do it. It was a liberating experience, and I knew that I would continue to pursue it.

I continued on my journey, but this time I was more mindful of my surroundings. I observed the world around me, and I tried to capture the essence of what I was seeing. And I found that I was able to do it.

I returned home, exhausted but exhilarated. I knew that I had achieved something special, and I was proud of myself. I knew that I would continue on my journey, and I was excited to see what the future held.

NOT LONG AGO, diaries housed private thoughts and feelings too intimate or shameful to reveal. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, expounding on yesterday’s parties, ideas, and dinner conversations. Some believe remembering can keep us sane, but Woolf succumbed to madness, and remarked on its approach in her diary.

Blogs are, oxymoronically, public diaries, where bloggers play with exposure, others’ and their own. Some use handles for anonymity, but with fingerprint signals in cyberspace and with reuse near impossible, nothing’s lost and everyone can be found. Billions of disclosures light up the Internet with electric abandon. While “private” and “public” have for years been theorized as permeable spaces, illusory divisions, people once lived those separate realities. Now they have actually blurred, and privacy and secrecy are becoming quaint ideas. Ids and personal information are hacked and jacked constantly, and individuals adjust their desires, needs, and aims in sync with technology’s capabilities.

In this electronic revolution, as written and filmed self-reportage and confessions choke the virtual highways, voyeurism and exhibitionism are just normal.

Stephen Shore wanted his travel diary, compiled in six weeks in the summer of 1973, to be a document of the world, one without commentary. He hoped to make a collection of facts, an objective account of his time on the road. He recorded the car mileage every day and, in its envelopes, kept road maps, gas bills (12 gallons, $5), and receipts for meals, which he pasted into his sketchbook later. He wrote down what he ate for breakfast (pancakes usually), lunch, and dinner (steak often). He took photographs and listed how many exposures he shot and of what. He distributed postcards of Amarillo, Texas, in drugstore card displays, surreptitiously marking his drive-by visits.

Shore’s diary also included picture postcards of towns and buildings he visited, and of some he didn’t; two news clippings; and hotel stationery. At night he watched TV and then noted the programs: CBS Evening News, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, The Bob Newhart Show, Mission: Impossible, the Watergate hearings—shows that instantly evoke the 1970s. His log, then, serves as a cultural artifact, registering more than just his American life.

Does the photographer, by capturing the way he sees and how much money he spent. Time is money, any taxi driver can affirm, and there’s only so much of each. Our expenditures, in all senses, define us, and a credit card bill can reveal as much as an intimate conversation. Shore’s approach assumes this position, and, through his minimal presentation of self as receipt and menu, his diary allows its readers to compose their own portrait of him. Lacking explanations or musings about them, Shore’s days are a body of ephemera, a compilation of data and bills, evidence. To reckon a character like this would have been anathema to Virginia Woolf. Shore’s diary strips being to an existential loneliness: You are what you do, where you go, and what you spend, not what you feel or think, or what you think about whatsoever.

Shore and I had a conversation a few years ago for his reissued book Uncommon Places: The Complete Works, which includes his seminal American road trip photographs. My first question was about Warhol’s influence on his early work. At seventeen, in the mid-60s, Shore hung around the Factory and observed Warhol working. Not only did Warhol tape, film, photograph, and print in cyberspace and with reuse near impossible, nothing’s lost and everyone can be found. Such a Factory. Warhol also told me (the anecdote wasn’t Warhol) that Warhol once gave Shore’s father his account books, because he wanted Mr. Shore to invest in the Velvet Underground. Shore’s father noticed an ordinary entry: “$10 for H for John's toothache.” Mr. Shore found it very funny that Warhol noted even the cost of herpes, especially in such a transparent manner. The willful objectivity in Stephen Shore’s early work takes a page from Warhol’s approach.

The sheets of Shore’s fourteen-by-one-inch sketchbook have yellowed some with age and appear brittle. Unlike a blog, which lacks materiality, his diary is a unique, tactile object. The idea of deathlessness in cyberspace can be reassuring, especially during a time of extreme transition: Wait six months, the technology will be better; but wait six months, the world will be worse. Shore’s diary is not virtual, it is indexical, presenting the things themselves, which, like, people, react to time. Now everything would be scanned and digitized, and it would never color, fade, or crack.

More curious than Shore’s goal of an objective diary is his last entry on the last page.