"That you o'erstep not the modesty of nature"

Stephen Shore's Concept of the Image

Heinz Liesbrock

Stephen Shore's photographs of the 1970s, all produced in the United States, constantly witness to a primordial, astonished way of looking at the country and the variety of the phenomena it presents. When the twenty-three-year-old left Manhattan, where he was born, for his first cross-country car trip to Amarillo, Texas, he was implicitly recalling what for a long time had been the most important topos in American culture: the view of the country as a Garden of Eden untouched by the malaise of history. From the very beginning, this point of view lay at the very heart of the process of settling the country, and provided the basis for the national identity of the United States. It accelerated the pace of the westward movement of settlement that shaped the history of North America during the nineteenth century: away from the centers of civilization, which were always felt to be corrupting influences, and out toward the unsettled wide open spaces of the West, where the individual, without the harassments and demands of society, could restore and preserve his or her personal integrity. The West thus came to symbolize a dream, whose capacity to become reality was proved precisely by the constant necessity to renew it.[1] American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries describes the extensive significance of the West in many different ways, from the work of James Fenimore Cooper through Mark Twain to F. Scott Fitzgerald and finally to Ernest Hemingway.

In contrast to the photographers whose work was shown alongside his in the exhibition "New Topographics," which articulated a new, objective and localizing tendency in American photography, Shore's interest lies not so much in cultural criticism as in the actual process of discovery. As Jonathan Green noted, while these photographers were concerned with the fracture points at which the landscape meets urban settlements – therefore turning to look back from the west, which for them also symbolized the country's utopian potential, toward the east, in order to record the wounds made by the process of civilizing the country[2] – Shore's gaze, by contrast, is

a more unconditional one. On his voyages of discovery, he does not bring with him any fixed ideas about what is coming. His interest focuses on encountering phenomena themselves, and he experiences apparently inarticulate, or up to then at least overlooked, forms of urban architecture, traffic routes, and the way in which they are embedded in the landscape, not so much as being indicators of crisis, but as a sphere yet to be discovered, one that has a special sensual attraction and capacity for truth. The experience of the West, for Shore, also stands for the opening up fo a new aesthetic horizon.

Shore's pictures, collected in the 1982 book *Uncommon Places,* are the product of several journeys across the country. Among them we find photographs of places on the east coast, in the Old South, but above all the book shows that the midwest and far west were the areas that responded most to the photographer's eye. His interest is caught by the broken pattern of settlement, the apparently unconstrained links between natural and urban shapes, by the network created by the various types of architecture, everyday graphic design, and objects present in public spaces. In particular, however, he is fascinated by the special quality of the light. In the pictures – even when a variety of shapes can be recognized in them – it is always the light that is the real protagonist. With his interest in the peculiar reality of the West, Shore takes up once again a line of the tradition of nineteenth-century American photography, one clearly seen, for example, in the pictures of Timothy O'Sullivan. Shore's gaze is never backward-looking or transfiguring in its effect here, however; it is always directed with extraordinary alertness to what is present, what is immediately apparent. In his sensitivity to the attractiveness of everyday shapes, and in the casualness with which they are depicted – a style that had also been formulated during the 1960s in Pop Art and Concept Art – Shore is decidely a contemporary. In his eyes, too, everyday items become articulate witnesses to a specific historical moment. But he charges his gaze with an utterly personal enchantment with what is visible, and the infrastructure of everyday life is always inscribed with a potential to become extraordinary. This link is based on the extraordinary intensity of his vision. An eye that to begin with seems to be gazing accidentally, scanning, always meets with a momentary truth. The otherwise blind world suddenly responds to us, the veil of its contingency parts to reveal a deeper order. Shore's talent is seen in his transformation of this moment of epiphany, essentially transitory in quality, into a solid pictorial structure, without disturbing its essential ephemerality.

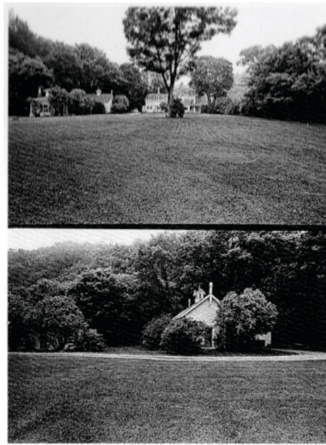
Even in his early color photographs, produced from 1973 onward, a specific balance emerges. Their novelty potential – their interest, for example, in the topography of anonymous places – is counterbalanced by a will to achieve from that is actually classical in its quality. The sensual attraction of the gaze is always interwoven with a structure internal to the picture, through which a precise will to achieve knowledge and perception expresses itself. Shore probably never went through a phase of being a naive photographer, relying on the sensual attraction of the momentary impression alone. Even his early black-and-white shots involve a degree of reflection on the problem of pictoriality. *Institute for General Semantics, Lakeville, Connecticut* (1970) is representative of a number of conceptually influenced photo series of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which the central theme is the possibility of depiction itself, and the role of the photographic author. The series of eight shots is still conceived as a composed picture, but at the same time it is also the negation of the view of the author as having personal qualities; it is more of an objective depiction of a movement of thought. While the camera moves forward in the four upper pictures – approaching the tree in the center of the image – in the lower row it turns by 90 degrees each time. The initially rather static-looking series is actually based on a rhythm that structures the sequence, returning to the starting-point in the last picture in the lower row.

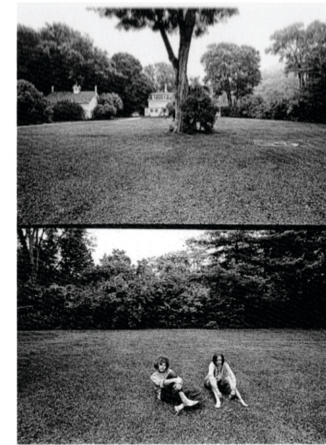
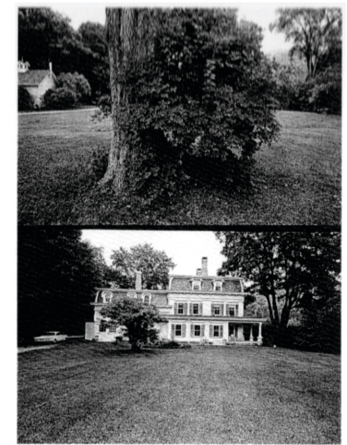
It is characteristic of Shore's conception of the image that

1 On the fundamental significance of the westward-moving boundary of settlement for the USA, cf. Henry Bamford Parkes, *The American Experience* (New York, 1959).

2 "The early photographers of the land stood with the civilized world behind them and looked out toward the wilderness. In the latter half of the Seventies the new breed of photographers reversed the orientation. They stood in the open land and pointed their cameras back toward the approaching civilization ... They photographed that point in the landscape where the Old West was unceasingly and irreversibly dissolving into contemporary, homogenized America." (Jonathan Green, *American Photography,* New York, 1984, pp. 163–4).

Timothy O'Sullivan, *The Gould and Curry Mill, Virginia City, Nevada*



Stephen Shore,
Institute for General Semantics, Lakeville, Connecticut, 1970

he soon abandoned this approach, which was clearly marked by conceptualist trends in the art of the period. Shortly afterward, he turned to color photography and to the autonomous image, saturated in its own structure. What distanced him from approaches such as that in the *Institute of General Semantics* was probably precisely their imbalance, the superfluity of reflection compared with the reality of the image. This search for balance, which I described above as a will to achieve classical form, is generally characteristic of his work in color. What he is attempting to achieve is a balance between the external world and the photographic author, or, to put it more precisely, an absolute point at which the photographer, with his personal tendencies and preferences, withdraws behind the visible world, and dissolves himself into the formal structure of the image – which also means, precisely, that he makes himself present in it. Shore describes this withdrawal in a recently completed unpublished manuscript, *The Nature of Photographs,* when he writes, "A photographer solves a picture, more than composes one." So it is principally a process of clarification within something that is already given, not a question of developing something fundamentally new, as might happen in an act of composition. Two texts that Shore refers to in a discussion with Michael Auping in 1981 in order to explain his view of himself as an artist are also characteristic of the special value attaching to this balance between external reality and a personal will to achieve form in his conception of the image. He quotes a passage from *Hamlet* (III. ii. 17–24) on the limits to the artistic will to achieve form that are set by the weight of nature. It is from this passage that the title of the present essay is taken. The second text he refers to is from the introduction to an anthology of Chinese poetry of the T'ang Dynasty, edited by Witter Bynner and published in 1929, attempting to identify a fundamental distinction between Western and Oriental art. Shore finds his own aesthetic intentions being reflected in the description of Chinese poetry:

> Chinese poetry rarely trespasses beyond the bounds of actuality. Whereas Western poets will take actualities as points of departure for exaggeration or fantasy, or else as shadows of contrast against dreams of unreality, the great Chinese poets accept the world exactly as they find it in all its terms, and with profound simplicity find therein sufficient solace. Even in phraseology they seldom talk about the things in terms of another, but are able enough and sure enough as artists to make the ultimately exact terms become the beautiful terms.[3]

As this passage makes clear, Shore perceives the counter-image to his own concept of the image as lying in a defamiliarization of the visible world through purely personally based preferences. Because what exists is itself already what is beautiful; it no longer has any need of an Other, of any subjective formation, which always brings with it a danger of arbitrariness. The genuine artist draws his criteria from what is

3 *Stephen Shore: Photographs* (catalogue), John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 1981, p. 9.

visible itself, submitting himself to it in his own will to achieve form – a will that is, after all, an essential precondition for any work; and he then allows this will to appear as a message that comes from nature itself.

How does this conception of the image – a conception that certainly incorporates within it a perspective on the world – express itself in the images themselves? To begin with, his photographs have a certain quality of casualness, and some of them at first sight create an impression that the eye has chanced on them on its way to look at something else. Often, situations capable of being used as motifs appear – consisting of buildings, cars, or a human figure – but they emerge only in the background, or lateral to the perspective lines, while our visual expectations, which are directed toward the foreground, meet with a broad, apparently empty stretch of asphalt, sand, or grass. It is this vision, utterly unspectacular in terms of motif, that represents the essential distinction between Stephen Shore's photographs and those of Walker Evans, with which they have often been compared. Evans's pictures are much more strongly marked by a single point of visual attention that the camera locates. The gaze that expresses itself in Shore's pictures does not have anything specific in sight that has caught its attention; rather, it is directed toward an intensification of reality itself, an intensification that emerges not so much from individaul objects as from a *situation,* to which there also belongs the light, the space between things as such. The aspect of objectivity and closeness to reality that Shore uses to characterize his conception of the image thus signifies that he is not trying to produce a report from an author who has sought out items worthy of becoming images. Instead, it is a certain capacity for meaning, a certain intensity within reality, that appeals to him, which he himself only grasps intuitively, and whose specific causality he may hardly be capable of articulating. In his pictures, the author always remains in a passive position. He only becomes noticeable through the explicitness of the way in which he sees, which in terms of motif remains comparatively neutral. It is matter of an exchange between inner and outer reality, an exchange that is ultimately not restricted to any specific constellation within the visible world.

But through this casualness, which has no wish to display anything, Shore also leads the observer to look more closely; and it is this that forms the basis for a recognition of the actual compositional achievement from which the image arises. Another element contributing to this is the way in which the foreground is often devoid of any explicit phenomena. Since a free surface stretches out in the foreground, observers are virtually integrated into the picture, receiving the impression that the pictorial space includes them as well, that they have taken up the position of the camera's eye.

Shore's photographs are images that have been pondered over to a special degree. Through his choice of the vanishing point and the exact demarcation of the image at its edges, he shapes the particular into a whole and allows a kind of natural composition to emerge. His pictures have never had the appearance of being details of something else; they always create a self-contained network of relationships. His frames are actually always active, and the picture develops its structures from the edges inward, and not vice versa. The impression of a closed situation is given. The finality, and simultaneous fragility, of these constructions is demonstrated when any experimental alteration of the edge of the pictures, even the slightest, is attempted. The previously unquestionable unity of the image at once collapses.

A photograph like *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974* exemplifies the way in which the first impression of "naturalness" actually conceals a precisely determined network of lines, shapes, colors, and zones of varying brightness, which give the work its own quality of solidity. The rows of buildings and the sidewalks on each side create a clear framework of perspective lines, meeting in the brighter

Stephen Shore, *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974*

Stephen Shore, *El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas, July 5, 1975*

background. Nevertheless, the photographer initially fixes our attention on the darker zone in the foreground. He manages to do this by relating his viewpoint to the strong vertical represented by the lamppost, which in turn emphasizes the vertical lines in the lower half of the building on the right. This viewpoint also makes the electric cable attached to the top of the lamppost appear to run parallel to the edge of the roof at the right. It is probably what lies opposite the lamppost that leads our gaze to the special attraction of the scenery in the foreground: the slightly brighter sidewalk, the reflection of the building in the background and a traffic sign in one of the shop windows, the attraction of the color and graphics of the advertising sign. But there is also the structure of the brick architecture, its microstructure and the sequence of projecting walls, windows, and plaster. In the gradually intensifying perception of these details and the connections between them, we still never have the feeling that we are taking pleasure in mere externals. Because the individual detail always has the appearance of being part of an overall structure, which is not only determined formally, but is based equally on a specific conception of meaning. As our gaze continues, an intensified form of attentiveness becomes more and more clear, an intensity of perception that expresses itself through the picture as a whole. This impression of a special structure of meaning is confirmed all the more when our gaze is finally released from the rich details in the foreground zone between the two facades and finds, beyond the road running transverse to the lower edge of the picture, the open, light-filled landscape with an ensemble of bright, wooden houses.

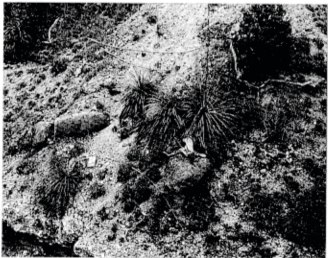
Shore's ability to react to fluid situations and translate the spontaneity unique to them into an image, using the heavy, difficult-to-set-up plate camera is seen in another photograph, one that has an apparently more confused structure. In *El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas, July 5, 1975,* he again selects a viewpoint facing a clear vertical, the back of a man waiting on the curb, thus initially giving the observer's gaze a fixed direction. On the sunlit island of sidewalk jutting into the foreground of the picture from two directions, there is a network of objects and their shadows from which individual aspects nevertheless seem to radiate, apparently autonomously: the tree that seems to have been placed on top of the concrete, and, to the right of it, an assembly of street signs (with the helmeted head at the center), which takes on its own values in terms of direction, surface, and color – values that may seem detached from the real spatial context of the picture. In general, in fact, the advertising and traffic signs in this picture are potentially released from their normal indicative character as graphics. They give the picture an ordered structure and a dynamic quality to the same degree that they momentarily step out of their context.

Since he started taking color shots, Shore has exclusively produced contact prints of the negatives, which since 1974 have measured 8 x 10 inches (ca. 20 x 25 cm). No enlargement is involved, therefore, and the greatest possible directness is achieved in the relation between the negative and the print. Precisely against the background of the large-sized reproductions that have become common in international photography in recent years, it is well worth emphasizing the advantages of the contact print, as Shore uses it. Its relatively small format gives it the appearance of being a concise visual impression, in which a wealth of detail can nevertheless be perceived, and which invites the observer to read the image, to engage in a progressive process of understanding the individual elements it contains and the connections between them. The contact print gives the picture an extraordinary formal differentiation and a special succinctness in its use of color; the special qualities of the contact print are discussed by Hilla and Bernd Becher in the conversation that appears later in this book. The contact print, as Shore sees it, undoubtedly gives the photographic image a quality of aura that no enlargement can achieve. His pictures therefore have a special presence, in which the

sensual conciseness is equally charged with an intellectual and spiritual force.

Shore's understanding of color is an unmistakable part of the peculiar, special quality that his pictures have. He shares a preference for the obvious – taking color and as it were saturating it with reality – with other artists belonging to the "second generation of color photographers," which emerged at the beginning of the 1970s. Color no longer has a decorative status, but is conceived instead as a natural quality of everyday experience. Shore, however, manages above and beyond this to shape color into an entirely personal form of expression. Natural light stimulates the whole of the space in his pictures, and does not appear to be a special phenomenon in itself that is being used in an attempt to dramatize the formal structure. Shadow formations, when they appear, have a quite incidental quality, and in no way seek to emancipate themselves and become independent constructions. Shore usually registers sunlight entering from the side, and this also explains the specially saturated quality that the light has in his work. Color is really a quality of the light for him. This subdues any potential tendency for the color to become harsh; and equally, the light itself in this way acquires a special delicacy. The light is absorbed into the colored materiality of objects, and charges them with a restrained glow. The impression arises that color has been spiritualized; it constantly appears to be *felt*, at every point. And this explains the sudden change often observed when the pictures are studied for a longer period, when the color becomes an independent construct, although without disturbing the unity of the image. Above all, however, the image's saturation with reality in Shore's work arises from the color; it is the color that provides the vital connection with the world.

Stephen Shore, *Lookout Hotel, Ogunquit, Maine, July 16, 1974*



Stephen Shore, *Uvalde County, Texas, 1987*

Toward the end of the 1970s, Shore's interest began to shift from urban contexts to the experience of landscape. There are already hints of this change in the later pictures in *Uncommon Places*. Landscape becomes the subject-matter here as a reality in its own right, one that admits human beings – who appear as figures, or are represented by objects associated with them – only sporadically, like visitors. At a time when other color photographers of his generation were beginning to cultivate a certain sensual opulence in their work, Shore developed a decidedly reductive aesthetics. The outward reason for this concentration on landscape contexts was an extended period that Shore spent in the sparsely populated state of Montana around 1980. Nevertheless, there was already an inner tendency in his work that makes this shift in thematic emphasis appear instead to be a continuous, organic development of an interest that had always been present. In spite of all the variety of his subjects and his love for the wealth of phenomena that reality presents, Shore's work from the very beginning has always been characterized by a quality of inner vision, developing independently of the motif and its special semantics. This vision is concerned with an intensity of perception, through which it relates itself to the world. One's own reality undergoes a process of verification through the actualization of its dialogue with the outside. Where Shore's work during the 1970s was characterized by an explicit aesthetic renewal that took place over an extremely short period, and which was qualified by an unreserved opening toward the outside, we can now recognize a continuous process of deepening and concentration that is necessarily combined with a more private, sometimes hermetic, quality in the image. Shore's artistic development as a whole can therefore be seen as incorporating the same topic of balance that we observe in the individual photographs.

The formal structure of the landscape pictures already immediately reveals this central element of concentration. The camera usually focuses on the lower half of the picture, and the lens is not level with the horizon, but angled toward the

ground. The line of the horizon thus does not appear as the center of the image, as it does in the classical view of landscape handed down in painting and photography, but instead seems rather incidental. In a number of the photographs, no horizon can be seen at all. The photographic gaze is directed immediately downward, and seems to be wanting to penetrate the ground in its peculiar intensity in order to record every manifestation of plant and mineral life. The pictures penetrate what is visible, giving it the appearance of a sphere that is more intellectual and spiritual.

The visual experience of the camera pointing downward can already be found in some of the still-life images of the 1970s. These, too, have an almost painfully excessive sharpness of focus with which they report on a sudden moment of perception that breaks into the everyday routine. In the landscape photographs, however, the dramatic quality unique to the "still lifes" – deriving from their clear deviation from the conventions of our visual experience – is now withdrawn, and instead an element of tranquillity emerges more strongly. They are therefore probably witnessing to a greater familiarity with precisely this moment of perception, a moment that simply happens, which cannot be conjured up by inputting external data.

What perhaps gives Shore's landscape photographs their incomparable quality is the justice that they attempt to achieve. Even though the focusing of the camera that is technically unavoidable in photography still remains clear, the pictures nevertheless succeed in animating the pictorial space as a whole. Each point in the picture seems to be demanding to appear at precisely the same level of intensity. Above and beyond the variety of the individual shapes, this intensity of the gaze communicates itself as the quality that is most essential to them. In the intensity of the gaze, nature appears as a symbol of the strangeness of the world itself: its deep fascination, and the simultaneous self-referentiality with which it rejects the significance we demand of it.