

the village VOICE

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WHAT DISTURBED ME about Stephen Shore's show of conceptual photographs—which closed a few days ago at the Metropolitan Museum—was not, as someone else has suggested, that the photographs were in a sense unnecessary or dispensable since they functioned as mere vehicles for the photographer's concepts, concepts which could (theoretically) have been written down on paper. On the contrary, I found that for the most part the concepts desperately needed the photographs; not because they could only be expressed visually, but because they were generally so lightweight that only their translation into objects to which we attach aesthetic significance could give them enough heft so that they might be taken seriously.

The basis for the growing movement known as conceptual art (which has its photographic equivalent as well) is two-fold. First, it is a denial on the part of certain artists of the role imposed on them, *de facto*, by our culture: that of manufacturers of objects which, in a consumer society, tend to become status symbols and baubles for the wealthy to play with. Second, it is a reaffirmation of a credo which has become somewhat debased and sentimentalized ("You may burn my poems, Nazi swine, but their spirit will live on in the hearts of my people!") but is nonetheless still valid; namely, that the core of most (if not all) creative work is the idea and/or process behind it, not the tangible final product and that such ideas cannot be bought or sold but are the property of all.

Both of these are legitimate and perhaps even noble attitudes. But it is to be hoped that neither their rightness nor their novelty (particularly in the photographic realm) necessitates a blind endorsement of all such works. These attitudes carry with them risks, and grave ones. The risk for the critic—serious in direct proportion to his rigidity—is that

new work will fit into none of his pre-established pigeonholes, mandating at least the building of a new set and at best the elimination of his need for categories. The risk for the audience is that, with the critics at least temporarily hamstrung in their self-imposed task of assigning degrees of immortality, and with the market index for ART effectively sidestepped, they may have to decide for themselves what a new work means and how significant it is in terms of their own experience. The risk for the artist, amidst all the concomitant new freedoms, is that he may delude himself into believing that because he has his mouth open he is saying something.

Shore seemed to me to be saying very little, certainly much less than can be (and has been) said within the comfortably wide margins of a 40-print exhibit.

The shortest of the half-dozen sequences in the show, for example, consisted of twin sets of portraits of his parents, each shown both fully dressed and in his/her underwear. Not only was I unable to discover whatever import the photographer may have seen in these sartorial contrasts, I was unable to read anything of my own into them.

The same held true for the longest sequence, "Kingston, N. Y.," an exploration of an automobile graveyard out in the woods. Individually, several of the images were appealing, but the sequence as a whole seemed overextended and purposeless.

Only one series, in fact, came close to succeeding—"Institute of General Semantics," a group of four double prints (the images printed in pairs, one above the other). Unless I was guilty of unwarranted reading-in, Shore was attempting in these prints to create a visual equivalent to the concept of semantics itself, employing pictures of the same subject (the Institute itself) made from different vantage points to explore some of the central concerns of semantics—the ways in which words can be used to ob-

latent image

by A. D. Coleman

fuscate and clarify, the variations in meaning which different people attach to the same word(s), and the basic difficulty of verbally pinpointing the non-verbal nature of things.

Because the content of this sequence—though not vastly original—seemed at least to have been well-conceived and understood by the photographer, the whole (concept plus image) had an inarguable *raison d'être*. Unfortunately, this was not true of most of the others; the ideas behind them were too flimsy to merit the permanence of photographic imagery.

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Stephen Shore's portraits of his parents fully dressed and in underclothes have a low-key conceptual charm.