

WAYS OF MAKING PICTURES

Interview by David Company

DAVID COMPANY: Stephen, I know you had a precociously early start in photography. Where did the affection for photography come from in the first place?

STEPHEN SHORE: I feel, in retrospect, I was just very lucky. When I was a little kid, I had a chemistry set. I also had an uncle who was an engineer in the U.S. Navy and who thought, *Well, maybe if this little guy is interested in chemistry, he'd like to try photography.* And so he gave me, for my sixth birthday, this little package made by Kodak that had hard rubber trays, a developing tank and reel, foil packets of chemicals, and an instruction book.

DC: So, the chemistry came before the picture-making? That's unusual.

SS: Yes, I wasn't making the pictures. My family just had a Brownie Hawkeye, and I would develop and print their snapshots. And then, by the time I was eight, after two years of darkroom work, it was a natural progression that I would want to take pictures. About three months before my ninth birthday, I got a 35 mm camera—a Ricoh Rangefinder.

DC: Did you have any kind of artistic background at school?

SS: No. Well, I was going to what in those days was called a “progressive school,” and so we had art classes, but I don't think there was much of a relationship to my interest in photography.

DC: That can be an advantage—to arrive at a medium without any baggage or history weighing you down.

SS: Yes, if you have ambition.

DC: By beginning in the darkroom with other people's images, did you have a more analytical attitude?

SS: If I'd been twenty, I would have, but I was six, seven, eight, and just having fun making prints! But I know I was thinking analytically about the prints, because the one surviving example is of a snapshot of me with an older cousin, and I'd printed it inside of a heart-shaped cardboard mask. So, I was thinking about visual possibilities and possibilities of printing.

DC: But within a few years you'd developed some kind of artistic sensibility.

SS: The influences at the time were largely terrible! The photography magazines were just showing the most banal stuff.

DC: Kitsch.

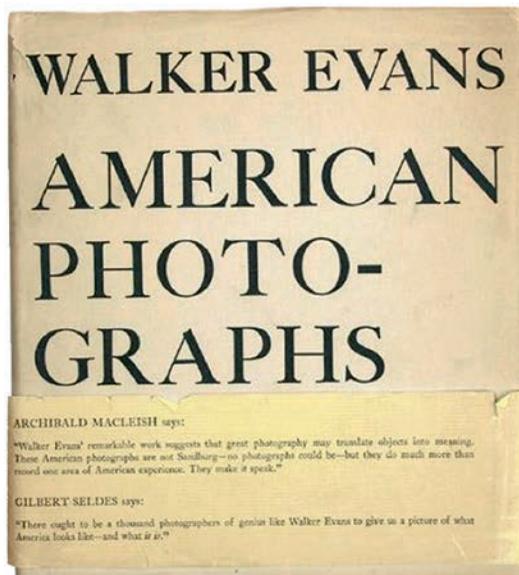
SS: Yes, mainly. Even at the Museum of Modern Art at the time. I wouldn't want to speak ill of Edward Steichen, but [the 1955 exhibition] *The Family of Man* . . . it had some good photographs in it, but they lost those qualities in that context of sentimentality. A Garry Winogrand image in there gets drowned out. I didn't see the show, but I had the book.

DC: So, where did your cultural ambition come from?

SS: We lived in an apartment house, and the man upstairs was very cultured—the head of a music publishing company. He knew my interest in photography, and for my tenth birthday he gave me a copy of Walker Evans's *American Photographs*.

DC: Wow, starting at the top! It's a difficult book, in lots of ways.

SS: Oh yeah, and I'd never heard of Evans. But I feel very grateful that [my neighbor] had that kind of insight. He could have given me a lot of other books and my life might have turned out very differently! [laughs]



DC: Such early exposure is amazing, but it's a while before one realizes just how high and how permanent those standards are. You couldn't have known Evans's photography would become a lifelong relationship. He seems to be one of your guiding lights . . .

SS: Absolutely. And I don't even think of it as simply an influence. Maybe I could bring in an analogy from left field: in homeopathy, there are what they call "constitutional types," and I feel he and I are the same constitutional type.

DC: Made of the same stuff.

SS: Yes. It feels much deeper than just an influence. When I saw his work I recognized someone who thought the way I would think if I were mature enough to think that way. I didn't think that way about it when I was twelve, looking at his work. But as I've lived with it over the years, I've recognized the kinship—but, in a way, the kinship predated any influence.

DC: And within a few years, you approached Edward Steichen, who was head of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. How old were you?

SS: Fourteen. I think I didn't know any better, but it was a different world then. He probably had very little to do all day. There weren't a lot of photographers coming to see him. If I were forty and not fourteen, it might have been a different answer.

DC: But there is an understanding that promise and talent, and accomplishment, can show themselves very early in photography. Maybe it's because the basic craft complex of the medium can be grasped pretty quickly.

SS: It couldn't be easier.

DC: And that allows for very rapid artistic development.

SS: I look at the work of some of my students: some struggle along, and then they make a breakthrough,

but others have something right from the start. But one of the indicators of success is *ambition*. With some students, I *know* they have more talent than they think they have, but they have little ambition. And I know that soon there will be so many other influences—the demands of life, having a job, having a love life—and they drift away from photography. It's very easy to find that you don't have time to do your art. I think I answered the ambition question when I called up Steichen at fourteen!

DC: What did he say?

SS: I don't remember. I have some visual memory. It was early days at the Modern. There was a series of townhouses on the street that had been joined together—this was several renovations ago. So, there was a warren of alleys to get to Steichen's office. He was very gracious and bought three prints there and then for what was called the Study Collection.

DC: And soon after, you met his successor, John Szarkowski . . .

SS: Yes, John was more interested in curating and writing than he was in collecting, which was a problem that Peter Galassi then had to deal with later. John did his great thing with the Atget collection but was more interested in other aspects. Anyway, he traded two of the prints Steichen had bought for two of my new ones; it's baffling to me why he did that. He saved the museum thirty dollars (fifteen dollars a piece), but the clerical time involved—de-acquisition, acquisition—it was so complicated! He could have just bought the new prints.

DC: But did you get on with Szarkowski?

SS: Oh, yes. Szarkowski arrived in 1962. In 1965 I started photographing Warhol and the Factory. I would go to John and ask to show him the work I was doing. The thing is, anyone could have walked into MoMA, but there were so few of us. I'd never been published at all—I wasn't a known "name"—but I just called up

WALKER EVANS
Cover of *American
Photographs* (New York:
Museum of Modern Art, 1938)

STEPHEN SHORE
New York, New York, ca. 1960



STEPHEN SHORE
*1:35 a.m., in Chinatown
restaurant*, 1965–67

BILLY NAME
*Stephen Shore and Ivy Nicholson
at the Factory*, 1966



and asked to see him. And as time went on, I would show him work regularly. I feel that, more than anyone, he was my teacher. Whenever I had a new body of work, I'd bring it to him. But that relationship came later. In 1965 I think he saw me because there were very few photographers asking to see him. It was a different world. Even in the early '70s, when Harold Jones opened LIGHT Gallery in New York, anyone could come in off the street, sit down, and show Harold their portfolio and talk with him. But by the end of the '70s, the position of photography had changed and gallerists couldn't do that. I think there was also a change in attitude. Joel Sternfeld refers to the early time of color as its "early Christian era." But in the '70s, we also felt like initiates. As a parallel, in the '80s, the photography scene in Italy was somewhat like it was in America in

the '60s—as primitive and unrecognized. A group of photographers there called themselves I Fratelli del Deserto [the brothers of the desert]! That was the feeling: we were brothers in this arcane craft.

DC: Let's talk about your time with Warhol at the Factory. I remember in the 1990s, when a book of the photos you had made there was published [*The Velvet Years: Warhol's Factory, 1965–67*, 1995], many people were surprised that those diaristic, informal images had been made by the same photographer who later became well-known for his sober and formal color work. It seemed to come from a very different attitude to the medium. People so often talked about "photographers" and "artists using photography," and it seemed you moved position. People wondered how

come the guy who made *Uncommon Places* had been at the Factory.

SS: I understand the distinction they're making, although I look at the Factory work I made and I see a formality to it that I feel is just ingrained in me.

DC: How often were you at the Factory?

SS: It varied over three years. For a while I would go every day.

DC: A large selection of your Factory photos appeared in Warhol's 1968 Moderna Museet catalogue. "Photographs by Stephen Eric Shore," it says.

SS: Yes, that's the place to see them.



DC: Did you consider yourself a chronicler of the place? Were you thinking anecdotally? Some of the pictures are quite formal, but others definitely have the looseness of an ongoing diary.

SS: Well, I was there so long that there are different answers to that. I first went there simply because it was the Factory; it was exciting, and I was documenting what was going on. But then these people became my friends, and so that changed the work. And then there was a period where Andy let me put up a sheet of seamless paper and I did a series of portraits of people who came in. There's actually a photo of me in that catalogue.

DC: In the folio of photos by Billy Name?

SS: Yes, a portrait of me with Ivy Nicholson.

DC: Dandy suit, big floppy hat—is that how you were dressing at the time?!

SS: Yes. Well, not always. I think I was dressing up a little there!

DC: Did you feel like you fit in at the Factory? People now see you as this urbane, formal, analytical, slightly detached guy, and they find it hard to picture you in that bohemian maelstrom.

SS: Are you suggesting Andy *wasn't* urbane and detached?

DC: Sure, *he* was urbane and detached, but the impression people have of that environment is very different.

SS: Well, different people were there for different reasons, but Andy worked every day. He was not a morning person, but he came in every afternoon and he had a 4-by-8-foot sheet of plywood as a table, and he would *work*. He always had something going on. There were other people who came, and there was a famous couch at the Factory, and they would sit and stare into space all day. And I remember at the time finding this just baffling, while Andy was so industrious. They would sit there waiting for the evening, when Andy would be invited to some party, and whoever was in the Factory went along. But I think I fit in, and, as I say, a number of people there were my friends. Even when I went through periods of not going to the Factory, these were the same people I was spending time with.

There was a crowd at the Factory from Cambridge, Massachusetts, who were the people around Edie Sedgwick. Most of them were friends of mine. I think Edie herself thought she was too sophisticated to deal with a seventeen-year-old kid photographer, and I don't think we ever had a conversation. When The Velvet Underground came, I never really got on with Lou [Reed], but John Cale and I became good friends. And Sterling Morrison. And Billy Name. Then there were people who were more peripheral—friends of the Cambridge people. I felt I fit in.

DC: Were you taking drugs?

SS: Not as much as some others. There was a lot of speed, but that was about it. There wasn't a wild drug scene. And also I was straight, which was maybe a little different from some of the people there.

DC: You've spoken of picking up a real work ethic from Warhol and an attitude to artistic problem-solving.

SS: Yes. I didn't realize this at the time, but in retrospect I see Andy was very open about his process. What I saw every day was someone making aesthetic decisions. He would try different color combinations, different printing techniques, and he'd say, "Oh, Stephen, what do you think of this color?" And it wasn't that he actually cared what I thought or [that] he was insecure; I think it was because some people like to work not in solitude but with people around them. It gave Andy energy to focus, and he would ask them questions to draw their energy into him.

DC: Are you like that as an artist?

SS: No, I work alone. Although, through doing commercial work, I learned to work in a collaborative way.

DC: Did your affection [for] everyday things and scenes come from Warhol? Obviously, photography has a disposition toward that.

SS: I think photography has a disposition toward it. And I think this is something maybe a little bit like

Walker Evans—I'm not sure I learned it from Andy, but I was attracted to his vision or attitude because there was some similarity. Andy may have been more . . . cynical than I am. But he took pleasure in the culture. He was just amazed at how things just are. It struck a chord that may have already existed in me. And as you suggested, this may have been why I was drawn to photography. It's what photography deals with.

DC: You made a series of pieces that have come to be known as your “Conceptual work.” These include *Circle No. 1* (1969) and *The Institute for General Semantics* (1970). These works are systematic, analytical, serial.

SS: That's how I was thinking just after I left the Factory. Andy's work wasn't really Conceptual, but he was dealing with serial imagery. And, for me, a very influential book at the time was John Coplans's *Serial Imagery*. I started hanging out at John Gibson Gallery, that showed—on the less Conceptual end—Christo and Richard Long, and—on the more conceptual end—Peter Hutchinson and Dennis Oppenheim. In fact, there were a number of conceptual artists who saw photography as a graphic element or documentary element. A number of them became friends of mine.

DC: Artists identified as “conceptual” are either regarded as seeing photography as a means to an end, or they have a very testy, suspicious attitude to it, not so much an affectionate one.

SS: Well, I wrote a text on the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher [*Festschrift Erasmuspreis*, 2002] in which I suggested that although they are talked about as conceptual artists, they are *photographers*, and the ultimate meaning of their work is not the concept. The “concept” of photographing six hundred water towers is not a very complex concept. In fact, it's not a concept; it is a *framework*. I know they achieved a certain status within Conceptual art, but they clearly transcended that. John Szarkowski had his blindneses, and this

was one of them. When the Bechers were first shown at MoMA, [their work] was in the sculpture department.

DC: Well, a lot of photographic work first got shown that way at MoMA. In 1970, when Szarkowski was putting on the big Evans retrospective. Kynaston McShine was organizing the big Conceptual show *Information* in the sculpture department.

SS: The meaning of the Bechers' work is visual, and that separated them from figures like Douglas Huebler. Huebler always had a plan, a system, like many conceptual artists, and a lot of the photos they made were dumb intentionally.

DC: Perfunctory.

SS: Yes, they wanted to deflect critical attention away from the work as photography and keep the image simply as a documentation of the idea. In a way the Bechers were doing the opposite, and that's where I went.

DC: The Bechers really loved those water towers. They knew a lot about them and wanted the viewer to see them.

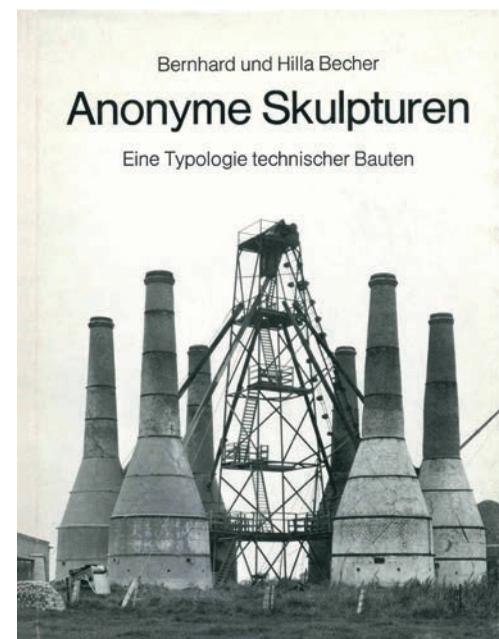
SS: Yes. So, coming out of a photographic background, I thought I could bring something visual to a concept. And so, for example, I did a series on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, where I'm starting on Forty-Second Street and walking up to Fifty-Ninth Street. And at the beginning of each block, I face due north and take a photo—but I do it with infrared film, and the sunlight glares off these people walking by, and it's highly visual.

DC: It's systematic but not mindlessly so.

SS: I'm trying to remove a certain amount of subjectivity from the decision-making.

DC: You're still choosing when to press the shutter.

SS: Sure. I once talked with the artist John Baldessari about the idea of trying to arrive at a less mediated



BERNHARD AND HILLA BECHER
Cover of *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten* (Anonymous Sculpture: A Typology of Technical Buildings / Düsseldorf, Germany: Art-Press Verlag, 1970)

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STEPHEN SHORE
Circle No. 1, 1969

The Institute for General Semantics,
Lakeville, Connecticut, 1970

photograph. If some of the decisions were made by a Conceptual framework, it would take out some of the personal influence, some of the personal conditioning. I did a series photographing a friend of mine over twenty-four hours. I'm still choosing where to stand, how to frame, focus, and so on—but I'm taking the photos exactly on the hour and half hour.

DC: But you didn't work in that way for very long.

SS: I realized I wasn't really addressing the issue, and that's when I began *American Surfaces*. I was still after a less mediated photography, a less mediated experience; it's still about making a photo that is less the product of visual and artistic convention. So, as a mental experiment, I would try to take a mental snapshot of my field of vision—what does this look like now? How am I looking at something? I'd do this

without a camera, but I would use this experience as a guide to structuring the pictures.

DC: So, this is why so many of the photos in that series feel like hyperlucid stares at the world.

SS: Exactly. But in the translation from seeing to photographing, certain conventions are entering.

DC: That's inevitable, no?

SS: Some snapshots are clearly very conventional, and there are many different conventions. But every now and then, there is a snapshot or a postcard that just shows what the Hi-Lo Motel *looks like*.

DC: It's usually in the middle of the frame.

SS: Yes, that's how people see. In art there is the "rule of thirds," but if I put you in the lower left-hand third

of my field of vision when we are talking to each other, it is disconcerting to both of us. It's just not how people look.

DC: But if we think of the visual field as being made up of "things" and "scenes," I can see that *American Surfaces* was largely about things, while the next project, *Uncommon Places*, was mainly concerned with scenes. There are overlaps, but as a general rule you go from surfaces to places.

SS: Yes, but I should say *American Surfaces* was called that in my mind while I was taking those pictures; I had that in my head. *Uncommon Places* was a title I came up with in 1982 for the book of that work.

DC: It might have been a disaster if you'd had that as a working title! When did you first start thinking about photographing beyond New York?



STEPHEN SHORE
New York City, September–October, 1972;
from the series *American Surfaces*

SS: It came out of experiences in Amarillo, Texas, where I had friends. It was actually through one of the Cambridge people at the Factory, who had a younger sister who was dating a young man from Amarillo named Michael Marsh. Michael became one of my closest friends. He appears in some of my work. In the Conceptual “twenty-four-hour” piece, he’s the guy. The first photograph in *American Surfaces* is also of Michael. He lives in New York, and every three months we still have lunch together. Anyway, through him I met a number of other people from Amarillo who were all living in New York. And in 1969 I went to Amarillo with them. I had been to Europe every year of my life—London, Paris, Madrid, Seville, Rome—but I’d seen very little of America. I’d been to LA once, but really New York was the western edge of my travel and Rome was the eastern edge.

DC: New York is very European in many ways. Did you photograph in London?

SS: I went once for a month and once for three months. I was friendly with John Chamberlain, who was making a film. I hung out and took pictures. But when I began to photograph America, I was also in many ways a foreigner. And I *loved* it, immediately.

DC: Did you drive to Amarillo?

SS: No, I flew. I didn’t drive at the time. If you grow up in New York, there is no reason to even have a car. In fact, it’s a burden to have a car. I loved Amarillo, not just what it looked like but the way people hung out—the pace of the life, the car culture, the barbecue joints.

DC: It was exotic?

SS: It was exotic but familiar, too. I didn’t love it like a tourist; I got *into* it. I would go there for a month.

DC: The light must have been a big source of attraction.



SS: Oh, yeah. Just to digress a little: recently, I have been one of twelve photographers commissioned to photograph for a big project in Israel. I have had an assistant who has also been assisting the German photographer Thomas Struth. It’s a desert country, Israel, with clear skies most of the time. The assistant told me that Thomas would wait hours for one tiny cloud to block the sun and then he would take his photograph.

DC: He’s used to overcast Northern European light.

SS: Right. He’s from Germany; I’m from America. And I love sunny days. I would photograph from Texas to Arizona, going to places where I knew I could have a sunny day every day. This morning, I was showing a magazine editor here in London some recent photographs from Winslow, Arizona, and she remarked on the blue skies; an American wouldn’t even comment on the blue skies.

DC: For you the blue is also compositional.

SS: It's a weight that balances the tonality of the bottom. A white sky wouldn't do it. Last week, when I was in Ukraine, half the time it was overcast and I would have to construct pictures differently to deal with not having that weight on the top of the picture.

DC: Many photographers see a problem in bright light and blue skies, and the drama of shadows, but this is exactly what you prefer.

SS: For me, that Southwestern light communicates a mental clarity, so there is a psychological attraction. It isn't simply a symbol of it but a representation of it. Also, if you work in that light for long enough, you have to work out how to integrate a shadow pictorially so that it is not about the shadow, it's about the physical object—but, structurally, the picture has to take the shadow into account.

DC: If those scenes in bright light are striking you as potential pictures, is it partly physiological? In bright light, our pupils are small, and so everything appears in focus from foreground to background.

SS: This is something I've been thinking about this past month. I've been reading a book by a Nobel laureate named Daniel Kahneman [*Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 2011]. He talks about psychological experiments in which people have to concentrate hard, like a mathematics problem. When they do this, their pupils dilate. I realized this is a problem for photographers.

DC: Because with dilated pupils, the depth of field is smaller?

SS: Yes. When I'm concentrating on making a picture, I understand three-dimensional space is being collapsed onto a picture plane. With dilated pupils, I'm not able to see the relation of foreground to background. I have to become so familiar with this that it's no longer a mental strain.

DC: So bright light helps with this problem. Concentration and pupil dilation is offset against bright light



STEPHEN SHORE
Amarillo, Texas, July 1972;
from the series
American Surfaces

STEPHEN SHORE
Girl (Mick-o-Matic), 1971

STEPHEN SHORE
West Palm Beach, Florida,
April–May 1973; from the
series American Surfaces

and pupil constriction! I can see a whole theory of European civilization being built on this! The more overcast the light, the more dilated the pupils, and the easier it is to concentrate on things in close proximity—reading, writing, painting still lifes and portraits!

SS: I'd never thought of it that way. Maybe that's why I went to the bright light! [laughs] Also, I didn't need to wear glasses until about twenty years ago.

DC: Coming back to the transition between American Surfaces and what came to be called Uncommon Places, can you talk about how much and how often you were shooting?

SS: Well, in 1972 I didn't have a clear idea about what I wanted to do. But I knew a couple of things. I'd gotten a little camera, a Rollei 35 mm. It was a 1972 version of a good point-and-shoot camera. I liked this because it was unthreatening. I could go up to some-

one on the street and say, "Can I take your picture?" and they wouldn't be anxious. I had other cameras—Nikons, Leicas, a Hasselblad—but I liked the Rollei a lot. It was innocuous-looking. Secondly, I had this idea of the "natural photograph," and I knew I was going to print the results as small snapshots.

DC: Drugstore prints?

SS: Yes, in those days Kodak actually made the prints. They had a lab in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and your film would be sent to them. A few days later, your prints would come back. Now, the year before, I'd made a series of photographs using the Mick-o-Matic.

DC: The camera in the shape of Mickey Mouse's face?

SS: Yes. Those pictures were an homage to the snapshot, to the unmediated photo. At the same time, the Mick-o-Matic played against this because everyone smiles at that camera! You can't avoid smiling.



But still, I was hoping for a kind of spontaneity that some snapshots occasionally contain. After a while, I wanted a camera with better optics, and the Rollei was perfect.

DC: Tiny and beautiful, but extremely high-quality, camera.

SS: The flash unit was mounted on the bottom, not on the top, and this was a godsend.

DC: People often can't put their finger on the source of the oddness of those flash-lit pictures.

SS: Yes, it's the fact that the shadow is cast upward. It has this weird, almost Cubist quality.

DC: Your photo of the hand reaching out to the transistor radio on an easel is very strange.

SS: The shadow separates the hand from the background. Still, today if I'm using flash, I'll hold it under

the camera or turn the camera upside down so the flash is underneath. But I can rarely get the result as good as the Rollei. I don't even know if the designers thought it out or whether there was only space for the flash underneath. Maybe there just wasn't enough room on the top for an accessory shoe.

DC: The closer the subject to the camera, the more pronounced the effect. And most of the flash-lit shots in *American Surfaces* are close-range.

SS: It was a small flash that wouldn't work beyond fifteen feet.

DC: You were shooting like that for a year or so?

SS: Roughly eighteen months. It was very exploratory. Within two days of beginning the trip, I noticed I was photographing the food I was eating, the beds I was sleeping in—I was making a diary. I'd made all that Conceptual and system-related work, or work with

ideational frameworks. I was thinking about the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. So, here was a way of deconstructing the experience of America through a series of repeated motifs. Well, what if I kept up this diary? Every single meal I ate? Every bed I slept in? I was gone two or three months, and you can get a lot of work done in that time.

DC: And what if America is a series of repeated motifs?

SS: Exactly. It wasn't a picture of life but a picture of life on the road. Then I would come back to New York.

DC: Were you seeing any of the results as you went along?

SS: I know that I was sending my film in packages back to New York, and they would arrive processed and printed all with the same date stamp: 7/12/72, A, B, C, D, E. That was my filing system. I know when I

started using 4-by-5 film, I was getting it sent back to me so I could see what I was doing. When I returned to New York, I thought I could do this for the rest of my life, or at least the following year.

DC: When was work from *American Surfaces* first exhibited?

SS: In the fall of 1972 at LIGHT Gallery—a little over two hundred unframed Kodak snapshots with white borders, covering three walls of the room in a grid three rows high, attached to the wall with double-sided tape.

DC: How was that received?

SS: Not particularly well. One review thought it was just terrible. I think people had many problems with it. I'll list them: there was the "fine art photography" tradition; the other people being shown by the gallery were André Kertész, Paul Strand, and Frederick Sommer, although also Winogrand and [Lee] Friedlander, and Emmet Gowin. Then there were Robert Fichter and Robert Heinecken. A great range, but there was an overriding sense of *craft*. I wasn't making these prints myself and I didn't frame or mount them—there was no reverence in the presentation. Plus, the grid made them hard to see as individual images.

DC: And the subject matter was not "acceptable?"

SS: I don't think [the reviewers] even got to the subject matter! Also, the prints were in color. A year later, I had lunch with Paul Strand, who—as a polite older gentleman talking to a young aspiring artist—told me that higher emotions could not be communicated in color.

DC: That was such an entrenched position back then.

SS: I remember thinking, *What would Kandinsky think of this statement?* Higher emotions could not be communicated in color?!

DC: Even when photographers were not being adamant about color in that way, many were equivocal. Walker Evans had been publishing color since 1945, but still in 1969 he's writing that it's vulgar and only artistically viable if the subject is the vulgarity of man-made objects and surfaces.

SS: Ah, well, I understand that. When I got to the 1980s, I realized that photographing nature untouched by man, in color, is very difficult. It can be done, and I believe I've done it, but it raises lots of problems. My wife Ginger was a picture researcher at *Fortune*, and I would ask her to find back issues containing Evans's photo-essays, many of which were in color. Anyway, people would come into my show and just see it as a kind of colored wallpaper. It was up for at least two months, and after a while I remember some of the people working at the gallery would tell me they had begun to really look at the pictures in a way that was very different from their first impression. I showed the series much more recently at PSI in New York. I made the prints very slightly larger. I kept them high-gloss and in a grid but had them framed. I understood this was taking away the "snapshot-ness" of them—particularly the materiality—but it was giving the viewer the space to look carefully at each one individually *and* at the series as a whole.

DC: I remember when you were part of the group exhibition *Cruel and Tender* at Tate Modern in 2003, Martin Parr showed *Common Sense*, his grid of ring-flashed close-ups printed and pasted in a grid directly to the wall. It had taken nearly thirty years for audiences to come around to that way of doing things.

SS: The one person who was actually very supportive of the LIGHT Gallery show was Weston Naef, who was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the time. He bought the show. You couldn't buy the prints individually; it was only for sale as an entire show.

DC: All two hundred and something prints?

SS: Yes, and it sold for two hundred and something dollars! It wasn't shown at the Metropolitan Museum until much later.

DC: What was Weston Naef responding to?

SS: We'd become good friends. He had curated the Met's show of my Conceptual work the year before, 1971. He was prepared to spend time looking closely at *American Surfaces*.

DC: At what point did the 4-by-5 view camera begin to interest you?

SS: In 1973 I was still continuing with 35 mm, but after the show I became less interested in my pictures as snapshots and more interested in other visual qualities—and in what the content was. This was becoming an exploration of America. In fact, the "snapshot-ness" began to interfere with people's understanding of the content; it was presenting a barrier. I wanted to make larger prints and found that I couldn't because the 35 mm film was just too grainy—I can make slightly larger prints today because I can boost the saturation to match the saturation of the smaller prints, but if I go much larger, I'll have sharpness problems. I needed a larger negative.

I wasn't aware of any medium-format cameras that weren't two-and-a-quarter square. I don't think the Plaubel was around or the medium-format Pentax. So, I got a Crown Graphic, a press camera, and thought I'd use it hand-held to continue with *American Surfaces*. Then I realized the flash was nowhere near as good as the Rollei 35. Also, if you look at *American Surfaces*, half the pictures are architectural. So, if I'm photographing a building, there's good reason to put the camera on a tripod. And totally to my surprise, I found I loved working with a tripod. And I loved looking at the ground-glass screen of the 4-by-5 camera. The next year, I got a 4-by-5 studio camera because I wanted to use lens movements. I never hand-held it; it was always on a tripod.

DC: It slowed you down; you couldn't take as many pictures. The noticing, the observation of the world around you, becomes very different.

SS: Yes. To use an analogy, we learn to walk when we're one year old, roughly. By the age of three, we can do it automatically. By the time we're twenty-five, we walk into a room and notice everyone is looking at us—we become awkward and, suddenly, we don't know how to walk again. If you were an actor, you'd have to learn how to walk with a conscious mind. You'd have to walk consciously across a stage—being observed while trying to look natural. It's a skill you have to relearn consciously.

I'm convinced that a good actor, having gone through that process, can go on the stage looking completely natural. There is an essential difference between that actor looking natural and the stagehand who walks naturally onto the stage after the performance. Because of the actor's conscious practice, he or she will move with stage presence. And I'm convinced there's something equivalent to this in photography. With the 4-by-5, and later the 8-by-10, shooting *Uncommon Places*, I was starting with structurally fairly simple pictures, but they soon became more and more structurally dense. And at the point that they became the densest, I made an abrupt switch, and they started becoming simpler again, almost returning to pictures like those in *American Surfaces*. But I've gone through this process of completely taking apart an image structurally, playing with it, seeing how much I can pack into it, playing with every element I can think of, with every variation, and coming back to something simple.

DC: But your photographs are so assured from the beginning of this process; that's what I find remarkable. Let's continue with the acting analogy: an actor can act clever, or act stupid, or learn to walk "naturally." But if that actor has to play the part of a *juggler*, then he or she really does have to be able to juggle—there's

no *acting* about it. When you see an actor juggle on screen, the acting falls away and you're just seeing the person juggling. That's a human competence you're watching, and you can't fake it.

SS: That's a wonderful point!

DC: Well, you were able to "juggle" very well pretty much from the beginning. I know you'd been thinking about pictures since you were six, so it's not as if it were completely new to you when you picked up the 4-by-5 and the 8-by-10. But whatever the achievement of *American Surfaces*, it was partly a form of photography that downplayed deliberately the skills of picture-making in pursuit of that snapshot feel. And a photographer can hide behind that kind of dumbed-down borrowed language—as Warhol was doing, as Ed Ruscha was, in part, doing. But when you pick up the 4-by-5, you now plunge yourself very rapidly into the very highest standards of complex composition, and you are able to do it. You're making virtuoso photographs within a matter of months. The standards are high almost immediately.

SS: I can't explain it. It would be awfully self-congratulatory to agree with you, but I understand what you're saying.

DC: A few years ago, you e-mailed me having read something I'd written about William Eggleston's photography. I was pointing out how assured his pictures were from very early on. There's something in the medium that allows for that. But life goes on, and, as you say, an artist moves in and out of self-consciousness. I remember reading your book *The Nature of Photographs* [1998] and thinking, *Are these the writings of an artist who is now able to reflect carefully and put into words what was beyond words for him back in the '70s?* How intuitively were you working back then?

SS: There are several aspects to the answer. Firstly, there is a difference between working intuitively and working analytically; then there's a difference

between working analytically and being able to write about it. I wouldn't have been able to write about what I was doing in the '70s. When I wrote *The Nature of Photographs*, I had been teaching for over a decade, and it had taught me about speaking about photographs. I had found some ways of talking about some things that other people were doing intuitively or unconsciously.

DC: Can you describe what you had been doing?

SS: In making *Uncommon Places*, I was walking down the street and watching all the relationships changing—watching objects in the foreground change in relation to the background, thinking about how space is going to be seen in monocular vision on a picture plane. What happened for me was that, right away and throughout the work, structural issues and questions came to my mind. I had to solve those questions, and in the process of solving them other questions would arise. But it wasn't as if I was sitting around thinking about them.

DC: The thinking was in the doing.

SS: Right. It was organic. And it began almost as soon as I began using the 4-by-5. How is the frame different if I lower it slightly and the bottom of that pole is in the shot? What happens when it's cut off? How does it change the space of the picture? How do people read these little changes? I liked intersections because they gave you real pictorial challenges. How do you organize that three-dimensional space as a picture? As I was answering this, another question would arise, then another. This went on for five years. And it was totally conscious.

DC: I have heard you describe what you were doing in those terms before, and I can see clearly what you are getting at. But in some ways, that formal language you use seems to suggest that the world or the picture is only made of forms that you're trying to handle. What do your formal decisions then do for the viewer of the

picture as communicating something about, for example, America? Or “the everyday?”

SS: I think I was convinced at the time that the psychological tenor of a picture is partially communicated through structural means—that the structure was not just a way of beautifying something that was there but was integral to the whole physical aspect of the experience of seeing the picture. I remember driving in New Jersey on some of the highways and in the distance you’d see the World Trade Center, and from certain angles it seemed to me the towers were too far apart and the proportions were wrong. But there were certain angles where the towers were closer together, and it seemed right. And I realized that I would stop at this point, and if you were driving you might stop at another point. It’s not that one is right and one is wrong but that there is some physical, emotional, psychological connection that I have with a certain proportion that might be different from what you might have. I think that kind of thing happens in these little decisions I am making. On the other hand, I’m not in any way suggesting this takes precedence over the fact that, for example, in one of my photographs there is a sign for a restaurant called Sambo’s, which is clearly racist.

DC: Yes. If we go back to the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, we might say there were two aims: to show beauty where there was thought to be no beauty, and to point out what was wrong with the world. In the postwar decades, serious photography begins to take everyday life as its primary subject matter. It’s not that the world is redeemed by being turned into a picture, but there is a discovery of extraordinary beauty in things or scenes that were barely designed with an aesthetic in mind—the ad hoc occurrence of different things in a space, a street, an interior. When I look at *Uncommon Places*, I fall in and out of formal judgment.

SS: One of the things I was reading a lot at the time were the—I guess now-disgraced—Austrian econo-

mists: people like Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk and his book *Value and Price*, and Ludwig von Mises. One of the things that come from an economic study of society is a sense of complexity. I think that’s something that attracted me. So, my photograph that contains the Sambo’s sign is not merely a condemnation of racism; I saw the situation as complex. I was interested in *what was*. Jumping ahead to 1993, I was commissioned to photograph Luzzara in Italy, exactly forty years after Paul Strand was there (although I wasn’t asked to do a “re-photographic project”). The Italian photo historian Paolo Costantini sent me a copy of a letter that Strand had written from Luzzara saying it was difficult to photograph there because there were no buildings of architectural interest! What struck me was how differently Strand and I would have understood “architectural interest.” Strand was looking for a building that was either “fine architecture” or something edifying of the human spirit. Whereas Evans might look for the beauty in simple architecture, seen through modernist eyes, I was fascinated with architecture as a physical expression of cultural forces. You can’t photograph cultural forces until they have a physical expression—that’s what I’m always looking for. A picture can contain conflict, like the photo with the Sambo’s sign, but that’s not all the picture is about.

DC: That’s interesting. Many commentators see Jeff Wall’s picture *Mimic* (1982) as a denunciation of racism. But Wall has responded by saying, “Yes, well, maybe. But it’s easy to denounce racism; you simply say, ‘Racism is bad.’ But this has nothing much to do with the pictorial experience.” You’re interested in the fact that the Sambo’s restaurant is there as one irrefutable presence in a complex world and a complex picture.

SS: Right. And in physical terms, that sign isn’t even the center of the picture; it is part of a larger structure.

DC: Most of your pictures are about a world that is unplanned, and the complexity comes from an accretion

of these unplanned elements. That’s the milieu in which you work best, no? Part of the problem of resolving a scene as a picture is coming into a relation with an unplanned world.

SS: Yes, that’s where the cultural forces show themselves. How do these forces interact with each other? That’s what I’m looking for.

DC: In total, do you have an idea of how many pictures you took for the *Uncommon Places* project?

SS: I don’t, but I know that the number of pictures I find interesting is close to seven hundred.

DC: That’s a lot. And when you first published it as a book in 1982, how many were included?

SS: Forty-nine.

DC: In retrospect, it’s a strange selection in that book. So many great images were not included.

SS: I think there were a number of reasons for that. The size was small because it was the first color book the publisher, Aperture, had done. For them, it was a very expensive book to do. Even though the book came out in 1982—and there were a couple of pictures at the end from the late ’70s and early ’80s—the book really began in the mid-’70s. In 1976 I had a show at MoMA, and Ansel Adams saw it and liked it and brought his publisher to it—a man named Tim Hill. He was the editor at the New York Graphic Society. He contacted me and asked if I’d like to do a book. But Tim left and went to Aperture. Well, we had to raise money and apply for a National Endowment for the Arts publishing grant. Then he left Aperture, and Carole Kismaric took it over. So, by the time it was finally printed in 1982, a lot of the editing was a long time in the past. One thing I’d say in retrospect is that it’s very dangerous to let an artist edit past work when they’re still in the midst of it. There were certain visual problems on my mind in the late ’70s that meant that pictures I’d done in, say, 1973 were irrelevant to me.

DC: But with hindsight . . .

SS: Now I look at those pictures and I can see them on their own merit. Anyway, that influenced the edit. I should say the title, *Uncommon Places*, was my idea, but that wound up in a way influencing the edit and the book so it became mostly pictures of places. Three pictures were kind of “stuck in” that didn’t fit with the edit—a close-up portrait of my wife Ginger (because she just looked so beautiful); a portrait of my friends Michael Marsh and his then-wife Sandy lying on a couch; and a picture of pancakes—all because they meant a lot to me. I fought for them to be included, and it may have been a mistake. Rather than thinking of the book as a summation of my work of the ’70s, maybe it should have been just a book of places, or intersections even, and more conceptually coherent as a result.

DC: But the project you shot was very diverse.

SS: Yes, it was. As with *American Surfaces*, I was doing portraits, still lifes, townscapes, landscapes. The *Uncommon Places* book was not designed to be a reflection of the whole body of work, but it came from it.

DC: I know you understand photography as a matter of problem-solving. Do you think you know at the time when the problem has been solved and you can move on?

SS: My experience at the time was that I didn’t have to make those decisions; it happened almost automatically. There came a time when the problems stopped arising. It took me a couple of years to realize I had, in fact, solved all the structural problems I’d set myself. I had, in fact, “mastered” those formal issues—maybe not all of them, but the ones that were in me that needed to be dealt with. It confused me at first when the questions stopped coming up. I didn’t know what to do.

DC: *American Surfaces* was a large project, as was *Uncommon Places*. I see that there is a difference between the widespread compulsion to repeat that pho-



STEPHEN SHORE
*Fifth Street and Broadway, Eureka,
California, September 2, 1974;*
from the series *Uncommon Places*



STEPHEN SHORE
*J. J. Summers Agency, Duluth,
 Minnesota, July 11, 1973;*
 from the series *Uncommon Places*

WALKER EVANS
*Highway Corner, Reedsville,
 West Virginia, 1935*
 Courtesy The J. Paul Getty Museum,
 Los Angeles

tography seems to invite and your approach, which is more teleological—*this* problem, then *this* one, then *this* one. A project comes to an end and you clear the decks a little. And over the years, you’ve had a lot of changes in direction. Those changes might be to do with motif or camera choice, or pictorial challenge. That has stood you in good stead. I see a parallel with the way Paul Graham has worked: once something has been achieved, he changes completely—the camera, the subject, the way of noticing or observing—even though the photography world would like him to continue and repeat. This way of going about things is fascinating. It implies that for all the unwavering commitment to photography, you keep open the question of what the medium is, what it’s for, what it’s best at doing. Historically, most photographers have not done that. The medium has been something spe-

cific for them, whatever it is, and they have stuck to it as a kind of mantra.

SS: There is a lot to think about there. I have begun my recent lectures with a story of having dinner at Weston Naef’s loft in the mid-’70s with Ansel Adams. We got on really well and Ansel has been a great inspiration, but during this dinner I saw him drink six large tumblers of straight vodka. And then at some point in the discussion, he said, “I had a creative hot streak in the 1940s, and since then I’ve been potboiling.” He didn’t say it with anguish but just out of recognition of the nature of his achievement and his situation. I thought to myself, *Gee, when I’m eighty-five and talking to a twenty-five year old, I don’t want to look at my life and say that.*

Think about Timothy O’Sullivan’s understanding of the medium: barely twenty years after the medium is

invented, he and several others—George Barnard’s work from the Civil War stands out—are making work that’s almost as good as it gets. But they had a different historical understanding of their medium than we do today. I knew by the time I was twenty that O’Sullivan had an active life of maybe ten years. I knew all the Walker Evans pictures I loved were made in an eighteen-month period.

DC: Evans did other great things pictorially, but he never surpassed his “hot streak.”

SS: Robert Frank, too. And coming to photography in the late twentieth century, it’s impossible to not know all this. And these aren’t minor photographers; these are the *best*. These are the people who have changed the medium. Frank and Evans are not lesser because their creative hot streak was a couple of years. There

are people who had forty-year careers and are well-respected but [who] didn't change the medium.

The people who have had long careers that I respect fall into two categories. There are those who had monomaniacal visions that propelled them, like Atget or the Bechers. Then there are people who kept looking at new things, new ways of doing things. They kept changing, like Alfred Stieglitz and Harry Callahan, or in a slightly different way, Lee Friedlander. I know that I'm in this second category. I can't spend my whole career doing one thing, because, as you say, it's to do with problem-solving. So, there I was in the early '80s feeling shocked because I might have "lost it," and then I come to realize I have maybe moved beyond it and need to begin a new phase.

DC: All that time you were shooting *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places*, were you also working commercially? How did you pay your bills?

SS: At the time of *American Surfaces* and the beginning of *Uncommon Places*, I was living off a little family money. By the end of 1974, that had gone. I was fortunate in that, in 1975, I got a National Endowment for the Arts grant. I also got a commission from Robert Venturi, which really paid for the cross-country trip that year.

DC: I've seen a few installation shots of the Venturi project—an exhibition in which some of your photos were used mural-size.

SS: Yes, 16-by-20-feet.

DC: What was the nature of that project?

SS: Venturi was commissioned to do a bicentennial show on American architecture for the Smithsonian Institution. It was called *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*. It had a number of different parts. There were neon signs that he'd collected. There were rooms of photographs of different styles of American architecture. There was a suite of three rooms, each including a 16-by-20-foot facade of a different style of house,

a 16-by-20-foot photograph of a view down the street, and then behind the facade was an actual furnished room. The furniture would have cartoon speech balloons around it, pointing out the historical sources in the styles. So he was deconstructing American culture and taste.

I shot some things that he wanted. They had to be on 8-by-10 transparencies. Through a Japanese process called Neko, the image was airbrushed automatically onto three-foot-wide sheets of paper and hung as wallpaper. Essentially, this was a 1975 version of scanning and ink-jet printing two decades before it became common practice. Beyond that, I had a rough list of things that interested him, but it was clear that our sensibilities were so similar that he was

essentially asking me to carry on doing what I was doing. I started in Los Angeles, and I drove to New York.

DC: Were there other commissions?

SS: A few. The next year, I got a Guggenheim grant. Also a commission from the Fort Worth art museum. Lee Friedlander and I were invited to Fort Worth, so I have a lot of work from that part of the world that year. And then, the following year, there was a very interesting commission for AT&T. I was one of twenty photographers invited to do whatever they wanted. It was a completely open brief; AT&T was just seeing what might happen. Firstly, I went to Florida and made some good pictures there, including the one of my wife Ginger standing in a swimming pool with her



STEPHEN SHORE
Installation shot,
Signs of Life, 1976
Renwick Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington D.C., 1976

back to me. There were others, too. The group on that commission was very good, including Harry Callahan, John Gossage, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, Mary Ellen Mark, and Richard Misrach. The final work was published as a book called *American Images* [1979]. My pictures of the Yankees were also made as part of a commission. So, there were several invitations. In 1976 I was one of the photographers on the courthouse commission from Seagram.

DC: That was a huge survey of America's courthouses.

SS: Yes, very big. I did a lot of work on that and got some work done for myself at the same time. Around 1977 I got a commission from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to photograph Claude Monet's gardens. It was to coincide with the museum's show of Monet's years painting at Giverny. My photographs were in a room showing what the gardens looked like after a big renovation. The woman who was the main backer of the renovation, called Lila Acheson Wallace, asked me to go back about five years later, when the gardens were more established, to photograph them again. That's how the book of those photographs came about.

DC: The matter of how photographers survived before the art market is not often discussed. When asked how he had made ends meet, Walker Evans said there were only four options: you are either independently wealthy to begin with; you are paid to take pictures ("commercial work"); you are paid *for* your pictures (as an artist); or you do something else for money and your photography is your serious pastime. It's kind of sobering but useful to see it in those terms. And, of course, good work can come out of a hybrid circumstance—working commercially but exploring one's own interests along the way. Arguably much of the great work of the last century got made that way.

SS: Commissions can bring a challenge that you weren't expecting. Well, for me, some did and some didn't. I got a commission from Fuji in 1978 or 1979 to

use their new 8-by-10 film and their lenses. Among others, my shot of Merced River in Yosemite was shot on Fuji. But the company was so disappointed: it wasn't what they were expecting a Stephen Shore photograph to look like. In fact, for their advertising campaign, they just used one of my older pictures. They even put the Fuji notches on the edge of the film to make it look like it was Fuji film!

DC: Were you selling many prints in the 1970s?

SS: Yes, but at \$150 each. The gallery got half, and then you paid taxes. So, it was commissions that paid the bills. I got occasional editorial pieces for magazines. There just seemed to be enough each year to keep me afloat.

DC: For all the continuity in your work, there are lots of anomalies that I find very interesting.

SS: What are you thinking of?

DC: Well, one of my favorite photography books is *Annie on Camera* [1982]. You were one of several photographers—including William Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz, Garry Winogrand, and Mitch Epstein—who were invited to photograph on the set of the movie *Annie*, directed by John Huston.

SS: It came about because someone at the production company liked photography and wanted to have the making of the film photographed by a range of different people. I went to Burbank in California, where they had built a huge set of a 1930s New York City street. The first decision to make was whether I was going to do it in black and white or color: I hadn't done black and white in ages, but I considered it. I could make pictures that could be pretty convincing as 1930s documents. But I went with color. It was the first time I'd got to see a great Hollywood set—how they made it look old through distressing, the oil stains on the street, the dust on windows, the fake condensation on glass. It was amazing to see. So, I embraced the reality that I was photographing a set.

DC: But even in that strange world, you were definitely making "Stephen Shore" pictures: intersections, shop fronts.

SS: That's true. Most of the pictures do have little indications that it's a movie set. A contemporary car in the background or some scaffolding. But even the decision to shoot in color meant that I was making photographs that couldn't have been made in the period setting of the movie. It's an anachronism. There are streets in New York that still look like those streets, but the decor and dressing are anachronistic, too. It was great fun.

DC: You had not photographed in Italy at this point, but you made a group portrait of extras that seems to be an homage to Paul Strand's famous image from his study of Luzzara.

SS: Yes, that's what I was thinking about. I think I was shooting there for a week. I'm going back to a number of different little projects I have done, to scan the negatives before they fade beyond salvage. In the process, I've come across lots of work that somehow got neglected, perhaps because I'm a bad editor or it just got sidelined. There's one group of pictures from 1976 that I'm looking at. I got a commission from *Fortune* magazine to photograph decaying steel towns. This came about because *Fortune* was changing its format, reducing the trim size, going from a monthly to a fortnightly magazine—they weren't going to have long articles and big, classic photo essays. Hedley Donovan, editor-in-chief of Time, Incorporated, which owned *Fortune*, had come up through the ranks at *Fortune* and was familiar with the great Walker Evans photo-essays. He wanted one of the last, large monthly issues to have one last big picture story. I believe he requested me. So, I did this work on steel towns in Buffalo, New York, and several places in Ohio. I shot with a 4-by-5, at a time when I was shooting *Uncommon Places* on 8-by-10. So it was a blip, and as time went by I forgot the work, but I like it very much. Some of them should really have been included in *Uncommon Places*.



DC: How was the layout in *Fortune*?

SS: Not great. A number of small images with larger ones printed across the gutter.

DC: You're not a gutter man.

SS: No, I'm not. It was one of the first editorial jobs I had. I had a fit and said, "You cannot gutter my pictures." But that kind of magazine work was coming to an end anyway.

DC: You began teaching around 1982, when *Uncommon Places* was published. Has teaching changed your relation to photography?

SS: When they are working, a photographer is thinking visually and there aren't really words attached to

it—that's not useful to students. So, I had to put into words things I'd been doing silently.

DC: You'd achieved a lot photographically by that point, but you yourself had not studied photography at school or college. Did that make teaching slightly equivocal?

SS: Oh, I think that helped because I didn't have to pretend that college study was the only route. But I'd been interested in education for a long time. I went through a period of reading a lot of educational theorists. I once spent a month at an experimental school in Cuernavaca, Mexico, run by a man named Ivan Illich. There were seminars by various American educators, and I was fascinated by how people learned things. I'd been through enough with my own work,

PAUL STRAND
The Lusetti Family, Luzzara, Italy, 1953

STEPHEN SHORE
On the Set of Annie, Warner Brothers, Burbank Studios, California, 1981

done it long enough, that I had a sense of a path an artist can take. So, I've seen my role at Bard [College] as helping each of the students to find their voice, which sometimes means letting them reach a dead end on their own or discovering something on their own. I've felt I could guide them.

DC: Around 1982 you also moved out of New York.

SS: Yes, to Montana. For various reasons, my wife and I loved fly-fishing. We'd spent two summers in Montana and just didn't want to leave. There was this landscape. And I began to ask myself, "How do you take a picture of a place that isn't man-made without it looking like a calendar picture or a postcard?" I had got to a point where I could walk into any town in America and have an understanding of the forces at play and come to a sense of what to photograph. But when I walked out into the land in Montana, I was just a New Yorker in paradise: "Oh gosh, isn't this beautiful!" I knew if I took a picture of that, it wouldn't have a deeper perception of the land. So, what I did was just live there without taking pictures of it for two years—just walking on the land, cross-country skiing on it, seeing it in different light, until I felt I was at a point where I had something to communicate about it other than its beauty.

DC: And that led to a decade of doing landscape work.

SS: Yes. At some point in the middle of the 1980s, for me the last essential formal question arose, or returned. Sometimes I would come across a photograph that had a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space.

DC: What does that mean—"a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space"?

SS: I use those words because I understand I'm looking at a flat piece of paper. So, it is an illusion; I'm not looking through a little window at a miniature world. I say "illusion" because it is an illusion.



STEPHEN SHORE
Stephen Shore, *Washington Street,
Struthers, Ohio, October 27, 1977*;
from the series *Uncommon Places*

DC: And yet nobody actually mistakes a photograph for a window. They don't mistake flatness for depth, so what does "convincing illusion" really mean here?

SS: I'm convinced there are some pictures that feel three-dimensional. One question that really began to preoccupy me was how it is that some photographs give you a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space. I tried to work on that in formal terms.

DC: That's a challenge in the Montana landscape.

SS: Exactly. An open landscape is not differentiated like an intersection. That became a real challenge: how to articulate three-dimensionality in a photograph of that kind of landscape.

It's difficult to explain, so here's an analogy: I love the movie *The Departed*. I've seen it four or five times. Recently, I've been focusing on Mark Wahlberg's performance. He's not one of the three main actors [Jack Nicholson, Matt Damon, and Leonardo DiCaprio]. I watch Mark Wahlberg, and I begin to forget this is Mark Wahlberg. There is something magical about him. He is almost physically transformed.

DC: Yes, he's reminiscent there of what used to be called a "character actor"—not a star performance, but one that adds to the "reality effect" of the milieu in which the "stars" operate. Although Wahlberg usually *is* a star.

SS: You get so involved, you don't see him as an actor. You've crossed into this other world. Coming back to photography, sometimes you buy into the illusion. Every now and again, you see a photograph where that illusion is really strong. In the '70s, I tried to work on it structurally. How does one little compositional detail—perhaps a post or a curb meeting the edge of the frame, or a telegraph pole—how do these things change the perception of space?

DC: The strange thing about the illusion of transparency is that the more successful it is, the more disarm-



STEPHEN SHORE
Gallatin County, Montana, 1982

ing it is, which leads the viewer to reflect upon the illusion and, thus, it ceases being an illusion. I have this feeling really strongly when I look at your picture of the green car [*Natural Bridge, New York, July 31, 1974*]. It's the most illusory photograph I've ever seen. It's quite unnerving. But that feeling produces an attention, a scrutiny of the image that undercuts the illusion. I'm brought up to its surface as a flat picture. It's too good.

SS: Are you saying you can't win?

DC: Yes, the more successful the illusion . . .

SS: . . . the more you are aware of it being an illusion.

DC: With that picture, I'm guessing, the illusion is not just a result of formal and technical qualities, like the light and focus being different in the background while the greens are continuous. It might also have to do with the repose of the car in that quiet social setting and what that might mean for me as a viewer. Often when photographers want to see what the world will look like as a picture, they close one eye. But if you want to see what a picture might look like as a three-dimensional world, you can do the same. Look at it with one eye and let your brain fill in what's missing. That picture needs to be reproduced well.

SS: Interestingly, some photographs are difficult to reproduce well, but that one always seems to reproduce well. I think there's another aspect to this, and it gets to what I was working on in the 1980s in the landscape pictures. It has to do with the state of mind and perception of the photographer. Let's say a person has spent a decade mastering the formal tools; that's not all that difficult. But then the photographer's perception of the scene obviously influences their photographic decisions. If I have become highly attuned to the three-dimensionality of space, I'm going to make slightly different decisions. It sounds almost tautological, but it's true. And then what if a photographer



STEPHEN SHORE
Natural Bridge, New York, July 31, 1974;
from the series *Uncommon Places*

is feeling the silence or stillness of a place? Maybe that affects the decisions also. It's not like I am consciously figuring it out; it's almost inevitable that it will come into the picture.

DC: It's interesting, your mentioning sound and silence. All photographs are mute, but I think of you as a silent photographer. Your photographs don't appear to be cutting off any sound. It's not just that you are photographing quiet places; it's to do with what you are seeing, your perception of the place, and how that translates into a photograph. I look at Winogrand's work, and I often think of the noise that must have been around him. It's not just that he photographs in noisy places; it's to do with *how* he photographs. One can make a quiet photograph in a busy street.

SS: Most of my pictures are made in a state of mind where there is some center of quietness. I'm not tuning out the sound, but I'm hearing it in a place within me that is quiet. I'm quiet inside.

DC: If photography for you is a matter of moving through a series of problems, what would be "mature work?" If extraordinary standards can be reached very early in life, what is the kind of photography that you now feel could only be made at the age you are now?

SS: That's a fascinating question. I want to go back to the matter of three-dimensional space because it will lead me to answering you. You asked me a while back how I give a feeling of depth in a picture when all there is before me is a field of grass. It's one thing to do that at an intersection of two roads, where I have one-point perspective and curbs and telephone wire all delineating space. It's quite another to do it in a field of grass or the Texas desert. Can I do it? That was the question I was working on in the second half of the 1980s, and I felt like I answered it.

I think now I can speak as a sixty-six-year-old man who started photography literally sixty years ago. I

feel there are different levels of mastery. First, there is technical mastery, which doesn't mean how to set f-stops but is about understanding the meaning of technical decisions. In photography that can come quite easily, I think—more easily than in almost any other medium. Then I found there was a process of formal mastery, and for me that arrived when certain formal questions stopped arising. That came at the end of the 1970s. Then in the 1980s, I'd say I was involved in a kind of psychological mastery.

I remember reading a Chinese story called "Prince Hui's Cook." The Prince marvels at the easy way his cook is butchering a piece of meat. He asks the butcher how he does it. The butcher tells him, "An ordinary cook hacks at the meat and has to change his blade once a month. A good cook slices the meat and changes his blade once a year. But I cut with my mind. I find interstices and simply insert the blade there. I have had this blade for twenty years, and I've never had to sharpen it." I remember reading this and thinking, *Oh, that's just a kind of precious Chinese wisdom*, and I forgot about it. And then in the '80s, as I'm working on this issue of space in the picture, this came back to me. I realized that's what I was aiming for. After all the controls—the physical and structural controls—have been dealt with, what I'm doing is changing my mind. The way I create depth in a landscape picture with no formal elements that seem to allow it really is, for me, to have a three-dimensional mental image and trust that I've had enough experience as a photographer that I will make very slight decisions that will put that into play. I don't try for it; all I'm doing is changing my mind, altering my perception. I'm not saying that alone is doing it, but that along with years of practice, technical and formal.

In most sports coaching at a professional level, imagining is used. A basketball player is taught to imagine the ball going in the basket, and the reason is that to shoot from the foul line, muscles are used from the toes to the fingertips, and you cannot consciously

control every muscular activity. But if you practice a couple of hours a day, five days a week, and have natural talent, maybe you could do it 60 percent of the time. In the imagining, you build up a muscular knowledge, muscular memory. Your muscles know if the throw feels right. The imagining becomes the coordinating factor. I'm proposing that something similar can happen in photography if you've mastered the technical craft and the structural craft.

DC: Are the things that you photograph a consequence of the pictorial problems that you decide to put before yourself?

SS: Yes. And at a certain point I thought, *Okay, I want to go to a place that's more extreme*. So, I picked west Texas and Scotland because I wanted places with no trees. I felt I'd hit on a way of controlling the medium in a very subtle way, but for me to really practice and hone this mental craft I had to go to a place where I have almost nothing to work with. I'd been to these Texas landscapes in 1975, and they made an impression on me. I'm not picking places just for formal reasons, because those reasons can't be separated from your feeling for the place. I was *connecting* with those landscapes, feeling what it was like to be there. Scotland . . . I don't know how that happened. I wanted open land that was lush, not dry, and I'd never been there. I looked at a topographic map and picked a place in the Highlands. I lucked out and spent a good month there. It was just what I wanted. I found it emotionally a very strong place. For *years* I had dreams of those landscapes of Scotland. The place has to mean something to me on a level beyond the formal.

DC: That's quite an extreme motivation. What does the beholder of your Scottish pictures feel?

SS: Well, they don't know my feelings or motivations.

DC: You don't set things up, so on one level the observed world remains primary for you. By contrast, a



STEPHEN SHORE
County of Sutherland, Scotland, 1990

STEPHEN SHORE
Brewster County, Texas, 1987



STEPHEN SHORE
Yucatán, Mexico, 1990

photographer like Jeff Wall may also be setting himself pictorial problems but is also setting up a scene in order to solve them. When people look at your photographs, they don't necessarily know that the subject has been chosen in an attempt to work through a mental or formal problem you have set for yourself; they may just see a highly descriptive image of a place or thing—organized as a picture, certainly—but the subject matter is forcefully there in front of them, just as it was in front of you. It's a world the viewer may not have visited, but your pictures invite them to visit it imaginatively. This relates to the documentary dimension of the medium, which you accept. Your pictures don't fight photography's worldly description at all. Can we ever know how our pictures are viewed? I can see Walker Evans was a pictorial problem-solver. I can also see he was interested in making statements about America in the 1930s.

SS: Right. If I think back to the '70s, when I was attempting to gain formal mastery, whenever I had a question in mind, I explored it not just in my work but in looking at other people's work—by doing it and by studying the past work of others, including Evans. I was looking at how conscious photographers of the past had dealt with the same issues. I felt I was apprenticing myself to a tradition, a tradition that may have started with, oh, I don't know, George Washington Wilson via Francis Frith and Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and Charles Marville and Atget, and obviously Evans. It was particularly people who used the view camera. There were others who I felt had consciously dealt with these problems. They were leaving traces for me to learn from.

DC: In that tradition those photographers are not only rising to pictorial challenges, they are also trying to communicate things, often very subtle things, about their world.

SS: Yes. I think both can happen at the same time. Maybe they *have* to happen at the same time. The

formal decisions have to grow out of what you want to show. Otherwise, it feels as if there's a structure imposed on what is shown, overlaid on the world, in such a way that it loses the transparency and becomes only about the "composition." But two of the essential problems or challenges that this tradition is dealing with are: "What do you want to show of the world?" and "What formal means do you have in order to resolve that?" I flew three thousand miles to rural Scotland so I could be on that open land, but I was going to a place that presented the physical situation for me to work in. It's not that I'm imposing something on the place; I'm going to a place where the problem is inherent in the place itself.

DC: That's very neatly put! How did you end up photographing in Yucatán?

SS: It was another place that had meaning for me. I had been there a number of times before and had strong memories of it. I was also interested in it because of a sense of a traditional culture in a land that is finely balanced in terms of natural forces—the climate, the geology. A few centimeters more of rain or a few more hours of sunshine leads to very different vegetation patterns and, therefore, a different way of life. Other places are irrigated and have a very different feeling. I was taking what I'd learned about the control of space while also being sensitive to the meaningfulness of a place—the culture, the patterns of land use.

DC: That's also there in your work in Luzzara.

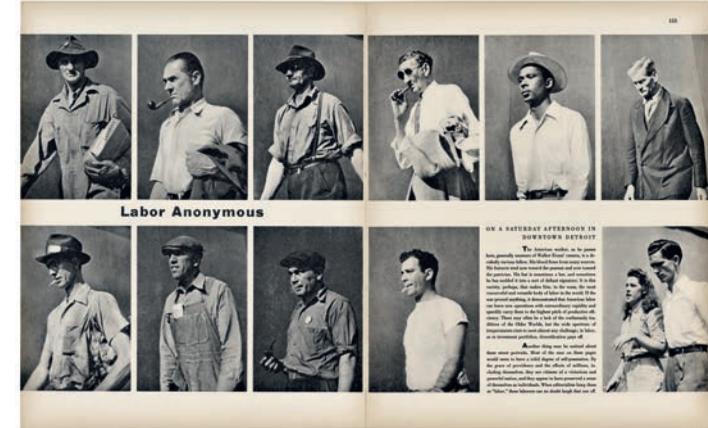
SS: It is. Although it may be regarded in Western terms as a more sophisticated culture than that of the Yucatán, it's still traditional in many ways. I'm photographing people going down to the river, for example.

DC: In 2001 you made a series of panoramic street photographs in New York. It was quite a big jump from what you'd been doing before. What was the challenge there?



TIMOTHY O'SULLIVAN
Lake in Conejos Cañon, Colorado, 1874
Courtesy the Library of Congress Collection,
Washington, D.C.

FRANCIS FRITH
The Hypaethral Temple, Philae, 1857
Courtesy the Scottish National Photography
Collection, Scottish National Portrait Gallery



SS: Well, in the landscape work I'd had this idea of honing a mental craft. I felt I'd really been able to put that into play in a number of series. And when I finished that, around 1991, I realized I'd spent twenty years working only in color. I was looking for a new way forward, and a couple of things came together. I'd been teaching for a decade nearly, and that included teaching black-and-white printing. In explaining it to students, I'd become a much better black-and-white printer than I'd ever been in the 1960s. I got really pretty good. Back in 1971, the only people using color, it seemed, were myself, William Eggleston, William Christenberry, Joel Meyerowitz, Luigi Ghirri, and a handful of others. The art photographic world was black and white. By 1991, *nobody* was working in black and white anymore, and so I thought, *What's this? This is another convention. Color has become a convention.* So I decided that for the next decade I would work in black and white.

DC: It was as clear-cut as that?

SS: Yes. It was that clear-cut.

DC: Can you see in black and white, the way Lee Friedlander seems to be able to see in black and white?

SS: Yes. I couldn't now, but at the time I could get right into it. Anyway, the black-and-white New York pictures came at the end of that period. But, also, I was never really able to come to grips with New York street photography for myself. Garry Winogrand has always been one of my favorite photographers. I don't have a lot of work hanging in my home, and none of my own pictures, but the photographer [whose work] I have the most of is Winogrand. I have the park bench photograph [*World's Fair*, 1964], which I look at all the time. He and I were friends, but his was just another world, not the world I dealt with.

I had done some photographs of archaeological digs in the 1990s, and one of the projects was in Italy on the Adriatic coast. I went there with Guido Guidi. We were both using Deardorff 8-by-10 cameras. Guido gave me a present, which was a wooden slide that popped into the back of the Deardorff and covered up half the frame. You can take two 4-by-10 pictures on one piece of 8-by-10 film. I had this for a couple of years and didn't know what to do with it, but it was in the back of my mind. And then at Bard College, we got a new Hewlett-Packard digital printer—this was the late 1990s—and you could print on a forty-four-inch roll of paper, any length you like. I thought, *Okay,*

what if I make 4-by-10 negatives and printed them with this digital printer? What could I do?

The first thing I did was photograph the trunk of a tree. But I thought this was so stupid, so obvious. Then I realized that because the diagonal measurement of 4-by-10 is a lot smaller than an 8-by-10, the normal lens is smaller. I could put a 180 mm lens on my 8-by-10, and the image would cover the film area and have more depth of field. Through my darkroom alchemy, I had found a better way of pushing film development. One Kodak developer, HC-110, decreased in contrast the more diluted you used it; this allowed me to push the film and keep the contrast normal. The problem of shooting 8-by-10 in the street is the small depth of field and the low shutter speed. Even in bright sunlight with 400 ISO film, you need to be shooting at least a 250th [of a second]. But I could shoot in sunlight and push the film to 1600 ISO and shoot at a 400th or a 500th, and with the shorter lens I could get a good depth of field and stop the action.

DC: But the problem is how to actually shoot the pictures, no?

SS: Exactly. So what I was trying to do was the most complicated photograph under those conditions: how

do I take Winogrand-esque street pictures with an 8-by-10, without being able to look through the camera and refocus? It's a ridiculous challenge, really, to make charged New York street pictures that way. But the crux of it was a belief that I can set up a camera on Fifty-Seventh [Street] and Fifth [Avenue], or Seventy-Seventh and Broadway, focus on empty space, and wait.

DC: It's New York. Something is bound to happen. You can lock the camera off on a tripod, preset your focus ...

SS: Things always happen in New York. You don't have to notice something and then quickly whip out your Leica. If you stand in one spot and wait, something will happen.

DC: That's a little like Walker Evans's series *Labor Anonymous* [1946], where he waits with his Rolleiflex on a street corner in Detroit. But you are sensing that if you can do it, you'll be catching a kind of photographic

seeing we've not seen before—a 2.5:1 [aspect ratio] street photograph with all the detail of a large-format negative. What was the success rate with this work? How many exposures did you make for every good one?

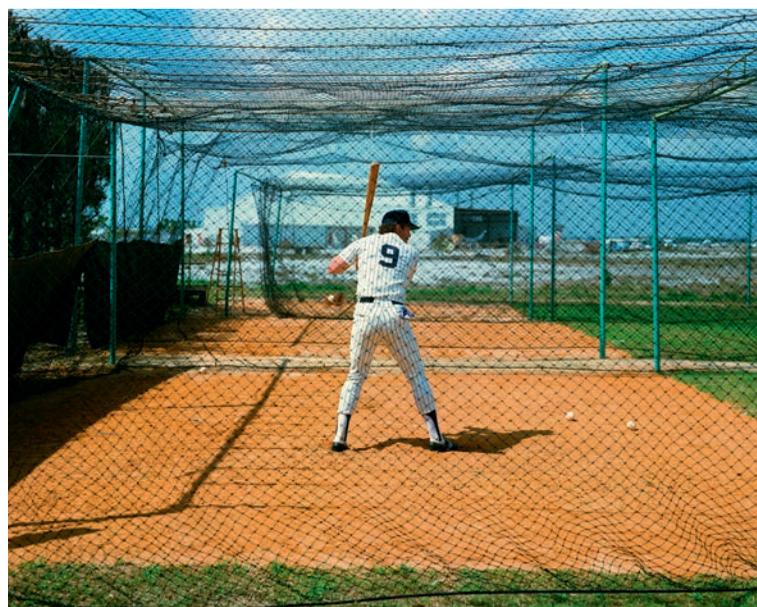
SS: The success rate was pretty good, but there was a lot of waiting time—a lot of time *not* shooting, not seeing anything I wanted. Although I wasn't able to look through the camera while shooting, I had a good idea of the framing. I would mark off in my mind the area out there in the space before me that would be in focus.

DC: Is that how you made the picture from *Uncommon Places* of the woman in green coming down the street?

SS: Yes. As she was coming toward me, I knew I had to shoot when she reached the spot on the ground on which I had pre-focused. That wasn't such a technical challenge; she was not that close and the depth of field was small.

DC: In New York, you were able to catch those figures just coming into or leaving the frame. I think of those New York street photos as your first shutter pictures. By that I mean the shutter is not just determining the correct exposure, it's producing the pictorial effect: arrested motion.

SS: With color film I always overexpose it. It's just essential. So, I'm working at 100 ISO. If I'm photographing baseball, there are only certain times I can take my shot. For a fraction of a second, Graig Nettles is poised, almost still, as he waits for the ball to be delivered. I can take a fifteenth of a second exposure right then, and it is absolutely crisp. Now, going to black and white, there's a two-stop difference, and when you're at the margins of what you can technically do, two stops is a lot. When I went to Italy, I found I could photograph people. And as long as they don't move forward and backward, out of the focus range, I can photograph much more freely. I wasn't freezing action in the Winogrand sense, but I felt that in Italy the



STEPHEN SHORE
New York City, 2000–2

WALKER EVANS
“*Labor Anonymous*,”
Fortune, November 1946

STEPHEN SHORE
*Washington Street, Watertown,
New York, August 1, 1974;*
from the series
Uncommon Places

STEPHEN SHORE
*Graig Nettles, Fort Lauderdale,
Florida, March 1, 1978;*
from the series
Uncommon Places

shutter was, as you say, beginning to come into play in a different way. I was looking for real moments of expression, fleeting moments, and trying to capture them.

I remember while I was making one of the New York pictures, a policeman came up to me and said, "Are you a photographer?" I'm standing there with an 8-by-10! I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm a photographer, too. That's an 8-by-10; I use a 4-by-5." So, we start a conversation while I'm still keeping an eye out for people going by. I take a few pictures while we're talking. Eventually, he asks my name and I tell him. He says, "I know your work. I have one of your books. I show it to my family, and they think your pictures are boring. But I tell them they don't understand!" [laughs] In the frame there was a car illegally parked on Fifty-Seventh Street, but it was a structural part of the picture. The driver was just about to pull out, and the policeman said, "Do you want me to stop him?"

DC: Oh, that's enough to restore one's faith in humanity. And in art, too! How civilized life would be if we all understood how photographs were made! [laughs]

So far, we haven't really discussed scale. The size of photographs seems to have become such a dominant way that people understand the medium now. Were the New York street pictures the first big ones that you made?

SS: Yes, the final prints are about 3 by 8 feet. Eventually, digital silver printing was developed and I didn't have to use the ink-jet printer. They are selenium-toned and much sharper edge-to-edge than a print made with an enlarger. Really beautiful prints. Around the time I was making these, I was also showing my landscape work at 35-by-40, up to 46. They were large for me but not large by the standards of the Germans, for example!

DC: Were the New York pictures conceived to be 3 by 8 feet? What I mean by that is, were you envisioning

a final size while shooting, knowing what it would be for a viewer to stand in front of them?

SS: Yes.

DC: It's interesting that, while a painter doesn't paint a painting and then decide what size it's going to be, a photographer can face the question of scale a long time after taking the photo. Scale is intrinsic to painting but not to photography in the same way. Several commentators, including Michael Fried and Jean-François Chevrier, noted a change in the late 1970s, when some photographers really did begin to conceive their work at a particular large size. Think, for example, of Jeff Wall's interest in what he calls "life scale." Wall has suggested that classical street photographers like Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, and Garry Winogrand had internalized the printed page as their preferred size and that their work often looks grotesque when it is blown up larger than that; the cut-off figures and the looming foregrounds don't work at a large scale. Certain photographers [for example, William Klein] have blown up their street photos for decades but in order to invoke the public poster, not the fine art tableau. It's as if the whole pictorial adventure of classic street photography took place within a white border no larger than 16 by 20 inches, and even within 8 by 10 inches. And, of course, most of those photographers either worked for magazines or wanted to make books; exhibiting on the gallery wall was often quite secondary. But this whole question is much more complicated in your work.

SS: I'd agree with all that. I've never been happy with the reproductions of my New York street photographs precisely because they were conceived at a different scale. They become so different when they're reproduced. The prints of *American Surfaces* were at that small drugstore-print size.

DC: There is an absolutely incomprehensible amount of detail in an 8-by-10 negative.

SS: That's true. In fact, there is so much detail that it can't be seen in a contact print. The prints I've been making recently are 20-by-24. There's no loss of sharpness, and an expansion of detail. There is probably some point where the detail stops expanding and the sharpness begins to decrease. When I started doing landscapes in Montana, I'd see a row of cattle go by in the far distance. You can barely see this, even in a 20-by-24 print. It may be a size of roughly 36-by-48 where you can see all that detail with no loss of sharpness.

DC: I presume you get more on an 8-by-10 negative that you could ever have seen at the time of shooting. It's a kind of hypervision. And as a result, the photographs become worlds unto themselves. It's nobody's intention, but it just comes with the procedure. The photographer has organized the frame, but the wealth of material goes beyond that, in what might be quite a radical and unsettling way, no?

SS: It's not as simple as that because there are different degrees, or different kinds, of conscious awareness. I could look at you now and see the pattern of books behind you; I could take a picture and not be surprised by the books. But if I were asked to draw what I see, I would have to look at each and every book individually. The same thing can happen if I look at a tree or a street.

DC: But by the same token, you *could* be surprised or, more exactly, you could not rule out the possibility of being surprised by what you find in the negative or print.

SS: I could not rule out that possibility, and occasionally I am surprised. But I think that attention is a faculty that can be exercised. I used to spend a while with an 8-by-10, just looking at the scene in front of me.

DC: Trying to imagine how the camera will see it.

SS: Yes. I'd be trying to make a mental note while looking through the scene. After a while, that process starts going faster as I'm developing that faculty of attention.



STEPHEN SHORE
Luzzara, Italy, 1993

DC: It can start to become kind of godlike—gargantuan feats of attention. Are there limits to this?

SS: It's not godlike, and there are limits. As you feel your faculty of attention developing, you realize you can really notice a lot and maybe not in specific detail. I understood early on that the 8-by-10 camera bore a particularly strange relation to time. It was the time of a certain kind of experience, which is, I think, what you're getting at. I could stand in front of a scene, and for me to notice everything I'd be photographing could take several minutes. Then I see the pictures, and it's as if that time of experience has been compressed and I can take it all in, in a few seconds.

DC: Do you think there are modes of attention that are appropriate to different cameras?

SS: Absolutely.

DC: Can they be transgressed?

SS: Well, I don't know. "Transgressed" is a moral judgment.

DC: I didn't mean it that way. If one says there is a mode of attention "appropriate" to a specific camera, it implies there might be inappropriate ones.

SS: Oh, I see.

DC: Arguably, your 8-by-10 New York street shots transgress the way an 8-by-10 camera is usually used; you were exploring a different mode of attention there and facilitating a different mode of attention for the viewer. At the other extreme, are we getting to a point now with digital cameras where the amount of capture—or perhaps the ability to shoot in low light with a very small and mobile camera—is breaking down those older distinctions between different modes of attention? What happens when a digital "snapshot" begins to have the amount of detail we associate with a 4-by-5, but with all the lightness and flexibility of a compact machine? It won't be long before that's possible.



GARRY WINOGRAND
World's Fair, New York, 1964

SS: Well, it's happening already to some extent. In terms of appropriate attention: when you said that, I thought about Garry Winogrand *World's Fair* of 1964 and the print of it I have hanging in my home. I've had that picture for maybe thirty-five years. It seems to me an Olympic feat to be able to pay attention to seven or eight people at once. I'm also convinced that he was not really paying attention to the background. If you look at the picture, there's a sense of collaging, in a way. There are people on the bench, and then there's an out-of-focus woman walking in the background. That sense of collaging, I believe, comes from one part of a picture resonating off all the decisions a photographer makes—the framing, the timing, the angle. It locks gears with it. And then another part of the picture is unconscious. Here, it's the background and it's not locking gears. So, Winogrand has a different kind of attention than an 8-by-10 photographer. With an 8-by-10, you generally have the time

to exercise attention in a way Winogrand could not. So, if I was photographing that park bench, I would have noticed what was behind. But I wouldn't be able to have that extraordinary feat that Winogrand achieved of watching each of those people at once; that kind of attention is amazing but appropriate to his kind of photography. I believe he learned a way of speeding his mind up. You know when you're in an auto accident and everything seems to be going in slow motion?

DC: Your senses are suddenly heightened.

SS: Exactly, and there is also a sense of inevitability. You see what is happening and what is going to happen. Think about what it would be if you could put yourself in that frame of mind, photographing on the street. I think Winogrand could see like that when he was photographing; he could see in slow motion.

DC: He had the time to see all those little micro-events coinciding.

SS: And he lifts the camera and takes the picture.

DC: There's chance, too.

SS: Oh, there has to be a lot of chance! It's the being alert to chance that really matters. I guess my 8-by-10 street work was trying to get at a little of both modes of attention—the slowness and the quickness in one.

DC: This way of thinking about photography interests me because it is very physiological; it hinges on not just eyes and brains, but on a whole musculature and nervous system. It's particularly heightened in Winogrand's street photography, but all photography and all modes of attention have a physiology. I wonder if this itself has a bearing on what we were saying about the short creative life of so many photographers. I remember seeing a documentary in which

Robert Frank was asked what it was like shooting for his book *The Americans*. He sighed and said, “Well . . . I was in really good shape back then.” So honest. It was a very physical understanding. That kind of work, that kind of attention, is heroic. It’s exhausting, and few photographers manage to sustain it beyond a few years. We just can’t see, and react to what we see, the way we did when we were young. Few people can. Do you feel that?

SS: When you say “can’t see the way we did,” do you mean physiologically or conceptually?

DC: I mean physiologically.

SS: I find I can see more now than I could in my youth.

DC: Your eye is just as “hungry?”

SS: I’m not sure about hungry, but I think that years spent working out a picture with an 8-by-10—where if I want to see it from a different angle, I have to physically lift up the camera and put it down somewhere else—if you do this hundreds and hundreds of times for years, it starts coming faster. You get better at making mental notes of everything you are seeing.

DC: Yes, but it’s not reactive shutter photography; you have time to train your vision. It’s interesting that many photographers extended their creative lives by moving from 35 mm shutter photography, rapid, hunter photography, to the slower stalking of the 4-by-5 and 8-by-10.

SS: I agree. As I get older, even the physical effort of using the 8-by-10 camera gets harder, but the decision-making gets easier because I’ve been doing it for so long. In terms of the exercising of my attention, I feel no diminishment of my faculties—quite the opposite.

DC: It seems that around 1990, with twenty years or so of work behind you, you began to move faster from one pictorial challenge to the next. The bodies of work

since then have become more defined from the outset. They are made over shorter periods of time, and you move to the next challenge with more confident purpose. Has that been the case?

SS: I would say that’s true. It comes back a little to what we were discussing earlier: about coming into photography at a point where it has an established history and noticing how so many intense, creative lives in photography had been very short. I knew I wanted a long life in photography. I wasn’t simply interested in documenting America; I was also interested in learning and understanding photography and perception.

DC: A photographer may change as they get older, but so does the medium, either through technical innovation or through shifts in wider attitudes toward what is significant about it.

SS: There are four things that are changing: the photographer is changing, the technology is changing, attitudes are changing, and the subject matter, the *world*, is changing. My students may not realize that, because they’re only eighteen years old. But the world I knew forty, fifty years ago has changed enormously, in all four ways.

DC: You seem quite acutely aware of all four of those factors, but it is possible for a photographer to be unaware of at least three of them. Back in Timothy O’Sullivan’s day, the medium really had no history, and those factors were barely on the table yet.

SS: Right, he couldn’t think about his creative life span in the same context as us.

DC: And he probably wouldn’t have even understood “creativity” in the same way. When we get to Walker Evans’s moment, he very much *is* a photographer who is aware of the rich history of his medium—maybe one of the first to really work with that knowledge. And he senses that what interests him are either the photographers who worked without creativity as a conscious motivation or those who tried to restrain

their creativity, to not impose it too heavily upon what they were photographing—stylelessness, or “the documentary style.” But in that restraint, there is an attempt to let the dominant factor of change be the world itself. I know there were moments when he was at the edge of what was technically possible—for example, when he made his New York subway photos around 1938 with the fastest film and the fastest lens commonly available, and again at the other end of his career when he used the then-new Polaroid SX-70. But in general, and certainly in that creative hot streak, his equipment and approach were very straightforward and familiar; it was the subject matter, his world, that was not.

SS: It’s the photographer’s temperament that keeps the four factors in whatever balance they are in.

DC: What is it that brings a body of work to a conclusion? Do you always know when you have finished and what was successful?

SS: It varies with the project. I was interested in archaeology in the 1990s; it wasn’t that I was interested in archaeological photography. For several years I subscribed to a number of archaeological magazines—read them cover to cover. I wanted to get on digs, which wasn’t always easy, as I was not helping. They were doing me a favor, letting me wander around. I went on three digs and made some photographs. I didn’t reach the point where I was repeating myself, and I didn’t repeat myself in the New York street pictures.

DC: So, do you find your interest now falls away as you are beginning to sense that you have met the challenge, rather than having to repeat in order to discover that you’ve done all you can?

SS: I’d say so, yes.

DC: Is there a sense in which successful photographs are often metaphors for photography, for the photographic procedure? Put another way, is there a sense

in which one can be attracted to a subject matter because of its particular resonance with the medium? For example, a photographer might be interested in archaeology because the subject matter—digging in the ground and revealing a fragment—has some kind of affinity with photography itself, understood as a medium of fragmentary traces of the past, fragments that cannot explain themselves. Likewise, an intersection might be appealing because photography is always at an intersection, a situation in which not all directions can be taken and a choice has to be made.

SS: Well, when I was on the archaeological digs, there was also a site photographer because photographs are all they have; as they dig, the archaeologists are destroying. There are certain artifacts they can keep, but the record they have is made up of precise drawings and photographs. I would watch the archaeological photographer take a picture, then pick up a ten-inch brush and back out of the site, wiping away his footprints as he went. When I was looking, I loved the way objects appeared to be emerging from the earth, but at the same time I could recognize this was an archaeological dig and these things were not on their own emerging from the earth; they were being uncovered in a particular context.

What you say about intersections being consonant with photography is also interesting. I guess I didn't think about it like that. Maybe the fragmentary nature of photography is so inherent that it can be consonant with *any* motif in the experience of the modern world. But I would say that I have seen my interest in motifs and subject matter change. In the '70s, I wanted to explore American culture. I would even dress the part of an explorer with a jumpsuit, like an astronaut. One year I dressed at Abercrombie & Fitch [originally an outdoor and sporting goods store]. It was my country, but I was an explorer in it.

DC: And at that point, you start to feel you are exploring photography as much as exploring America.

But once the formal takes over and subject matter is merely the means to an end, does the whole process become too dry and boring? When photography is only photography, it isn't even photography.

SS: Right! That's the point at which those particular formal questions stop arising. But as a result of that experience, when I then began to explore other things—from the 1980s onward—I did have a different relation to subject matter. From then on, subject and form were explored much more in unison.

DC: You've been teaching for three decades, and you have been a very open-minded teacher.

SS: To lead each student to find their own voice, it meant that I had to think like each of them. It wouldn't do them any good to get them all to make work the way I had been making work. So, teaching really involves imagining you are the student and thinking what might be the next thing they should do. This led me, in a class of ten people, to think like ten different photographers. I wound up seeing more photographic possibilities. I think that in some way this led me to begin to make print-on-demand books, and eventually to making eighty-three of those books. I would see something that I wouldn't be interested in devoting a year to, but *would* be interested in devoting a day to. The books allowed me to do that.

DC: You started with these in 2003.

SS: Yes, and I made print-on-demand books over a period of five years. There were a number of different series of these books. Each is shot in a day and shot with a book in mind. I was shooting on a compact digital camera—although a couple at the beginning were on a more high-end camera, and there's a book using postcards of civic architecture I had collected in the late '60s and '70s, and there's one that's all text, called *Heavy Metal Alphabet*, with the names of heavy metal bands in alphabetical order, one page for each letter. But mostly the books are image sequences.

DC: Although print-on-demand books are technologically new, did you feel this work was a return to a certain kind of thinking you were doing in the '60s and '70s—a return to vernacular image forms and conceptual frameworks, but under new terms?

SS: Yes, or at least some of them. Some were fairly rigid conceptual sequences—for example, walking along a path and taking a picture every ten meters. Two of the books combined pictures and text. Two series were based on trees. One was the marula tree: its leaves, its fruit, its bark. Marula is the favorite food of elephants, and it's believed they may even get high on it. There are pictures of elephants eating the marula, a page of text describing the tree, photos of a curd made from it called amarula. Another book is called *The Firewood Tree*. It's the favorite food of giraffes and has medicinal uses and burns for a long time. But this book is entirely fictional; there's no truth to it at all. The text is fabricated.

DC: Your work before this seems to have been motivated by parameters. When you come to the print-on-demand books, although there are fewer parameters, it seems you're saying to yourself, "Okay, anything is possible with this book format."

SS: Well, since these are book-based projects, the limits are really various parameters of the sequence. For a while I would commit to making a book on each day that the *New York Times* had run a six-column banner headline, which would be a major news day: George Bush reelected president, Hurricane Katrina wipes out New Orleans. On those days I would do a book and it would be like a time capsule. Other books are based on places I was traveling to. Some are connected visually. Some are cultural, like the one of a flea market in Vienna, where each picture contains an image that feels typically Austrian or Germanic-Austrian. There are all different kinds of ways of organizing pictures as sequences.

DC: Can I ask you a broader question about how the world of photography has changed around you? You

talked earlier about being just one of a few isolated individuals making color work in the 1970s. Then, after a decade or so, there is a lot of wider interest in photography and in that work in particular. So, while you're moving forward—changing how you do things, exploring photography, meeting new challenges—there is a broader discovery of your archive. I imagine you found yourself being a contemporary artist and also a “figure from the past.”

SS: Just this past week, I read somewhere a reference to the 1970s as a “golden age” of photography. I'd never thought of it like that.

DC: To some extent, I feel it was. There has been more than one golden age, but I think that, artistically, a number of doors had opened for photography during the 1960s. Also, today's art market did not exist, which overinflates not just prices but reputations and critical standings; determines the consensus; ignores what buyers don't like or don't understand; and forces a slow and incremental development that does not allow for the great leaps that photographers are able to make. So, [in comparison] it was a very free time for photography. Several photographers covered huge artistic ground in relative obscurity and in a short period of time: Robert Cumming, Robert Heinecken, John Divola, Les Krims, William Eggleston, John Baldessari, yourself. Even at the tail end of the 1970s—think of the ground covered by Cindy Sherman. She mapped out everything for herself in just a few years. Photography was available technically and artistically in ways that it hadn't been before.

There is also a “golden era” understood in broader ways, simply to do with life in America then. I was showing the book *Uncommon Places* to a friend, and he was fascinated by the period details. He named all the vehicles, looked at what was on at cinemas, looked at prices of things in shop windows. He wondered if you had a thing for MGB cars or whether there were a lot of them in America at that time.

SS: They do recur in my pictures! By coincidence, in 1980 my wife bought one.

DC: I'm sure there is an appeal of those pictures that is now to do with their social-historical content.

SS: I do run into people who talk about those pictures as nostalgic. But at the time, they would have looked at them and thought, *Why would he photograph all this? It's just what the world looks like!*

But I would say there was a consciousness about how pictures change in time, which I had learned from Walker Evans. A car functions very specifically in a photograph because cars change faster than buildings. A building can be five hundred years old, but a car isn't going to be more than five or ten years old. Although, occasionally, Evans would photograph a particularly old car. Still, if you have a line of cars on a street, it gives the photograph a particular time frame: cars are seeds of time.

DC: I feel that way about your print-on-demand books. The self-imposed restriction of making each book in a day makes you acutely aware of time and the present.

SS: One of my favorites of those books has my son holding an iPod in his hand. It has a gas station with a sign for the price of milk. It has a movie theater, so you can see which movie is playing. I'm doing this because I'm thinking about how this cultural information is going to be viewed maybe fifty years hence.

DC: That's funny. When I was a student about two decades ago, I got a computer floppy disk and on the paper label I wrote, “Notes for Lasting World Peace and Understanding.” I threw it onto the sidewalk, let people walk all over it, and then photographed it on 4-by-5.

SS: [Laughs] World peace in a format we can no longer read!

DC: Right, but at the time I wasn't thinking that even the 4-by-5 film would also be an historical relic!

SS: About three weeks ago, there was a very funny cover of the *New Yorker* that was a reference to the disastrous launch of Obamacare. Obama is holding a huge, early 1990s cell phone, standing next to a CRT computer monitor. An assistant is about to load a floppy disk of the Obamacare program as [Obama and Katherine Sebelius] stand there with their fingers crossed!

DC: What's next for you, Stephen?

SS: I've no idea.

DC: Has that always been the way?

SS: No. I've just finished a project in the Ukraine. My wife had come across a foundation that helps give financial support to Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe. She started making donations. I did, too. We got sent pictures of stories about these people who had escaped execution by fleeing east. So, they had all done something to survive seventy years ago that was really heroic. Today, these people have fallen through the cracks because if they had been sent to Auschwitz or another camp, they'd be entitled to reparations from the German government. But because they were a little too far east, they live off what their own countries give them, which varies depending on the country. So, this foundation was set up to help them. These people are now in their mid-eighties to mid-nineties. My wife said this would be an interesting subject to photograph. So, I went.

The foundation is in various countries—Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania—but I ended up photographing only in the Ukraine. My paternal grandfather emigrated from the Ukraine in the 1890s, and I knew which region he was from. So, there was some connection and I needed to start somewhere. I've been reading a lot about the region. I've found



STEPHEN SHORE
Bazalia, Ukraine, 2012;
from the series *Ukraine*

the people fascinating and admirable. And this is a life that in five years might not be possible to document. The foundation supports fifteen hundred people today, but in five years that might only be ten or twenty.

DC: What have you been trying to do photographically?

SS: A number of things. I was very aware that I'd never photographed anything that had a really strong

emotional resonance. People have feelings about gas stations but not the way they have feelings about the Holocaust. I didn't get drawn into this project for aesthetic or formal reasons, obviously, but if there has been a formal problem on my mind, it is how to take a picture of a subject matter that is so emotionally charged but not have the pictures be illustrations—and not let them rest on that emotion. But not have the pictures avoid that content either. Can I communicate some of the emotional power I feel in that

country without it simply being a connection to the label "Holocaust?"

I found being in Ukraine a very strong experience, but I didn't know if that was to do with family connections or the history of the place. I read Timothy Snyder's amazing book *Bloodlands*, which is a history of Poland and Eastern Europe from 1930 to around 1950, Stalin to Hitler to Stalin. What Ukraine went through was unbelievable. At the same time, part of

STEPHEN SHORE

Dikhtayar Home, Bazalia, Ukraine, 2012;
from the series *Ukraine*



the reason Ukraine has had problems is that it has such rich soil, the richest I've ever seen—almost black. Driving through parts of Ukraine is like driving through Iowa: cornfields, sunflower fields are far as you can see. Everyone wanted it. Stalin wanted it to feed all the Soviet Union; Hitler wanted to move the Ukrainians out and move German farmers in.

DC: One can tell oneself why one is attracted to a place, but often it is very unconscious.

SS: It's not easy to explain, this emotional connection to a place. I've had it in Yucatán, in Amarillo, in Scotland—very different places. Ukraine stirred something very different, and I'm hoping the pictures communicate something of that.

DC: It's a brave way to work. In general, you've been attracted to the look and feel of the everyday, the familiar, which you try to render profound and compelling as a picture. In Ukraine, you're dealing not with the

everyday but with an exceptional or atypical historical circumstance. The Greeks have two words for time: *chronos* is time as marked by, or organized by, historical events; *kairos* is all the unspecified, undefined bits in between. Generally you've been a photographer of *kairos*. Now you're coming into a relation to *chronos*. So, that's a big shift for you. It's a very different burden placed on the image.

SS: Yes, it is.