

Art in America

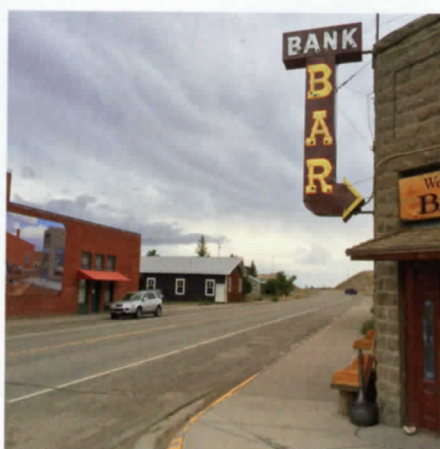
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\$12 NOVEMBER 2017 COVER BY STEPHEN SHORE

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Nari Ward / Minerva Cuevas / Stephen Shore / Rigo 23 / Yto Barrada



STEPHEN SHORE
Nine photographs from Shore's
Instagram series, 2014–17.
© Stephen Shore. Courtesy
303 Gallery, New York.

PORTFOLIO: STEPHEN SHORE

Dear Stephen Shore,

My first experience interacting with photographers who weren't my relatives and who weren't always yelling at me to "smile"—who weren't even shooting me at all—was back in the early 2000s, when I was in my early twenties and working as a journalist throughout the former Eastern Bloc. This was also my first experience with the hopeless prospect—rather, with the ideal—of being "unbiased." The photographers I was working with were older Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, and Poles—"photojournalists" is the journalist's word—who would either follow me around on stories or read my stories after I wrote them and then go to the same locations and/or visit the same people I'd interviewed and shoot them. I knew all too well what was missing from my writing—what I'd had to leave out due to journalism's stylistic conventions and standards of facticity. I knew all too well the confusions between what I saw and what I thought (not to mention the disjunction between what I heard from the people I was interviewing and what *they thought*), just as I knew all too well the difficulties in distinguishing between my private desires to define "the truth" and my professional responsibilities to protect a more public notion of "the verifiable truth," which was, I was realizing, ultimately too culturally specific to America to be trusted by most of the people I was living among and "reporting on"—the Ukrainians and Russians in particular. To be sure, the photographs that accompanied my writing would leave out many things too, but then, to my mind, they were primarily scrutinized for their aesthetics: an image didn't always have to be "correct," it merely had to be "compelling," which is an artistic type of "accuracy." Needless to say, I was envious of these photographers—I envied them even after they were forced out of journalism, when the news business went online and started expecting writers to take photos for themselves. A few of these old photographer friends are still in touch, through the very technology that ended their careers.

I'll return to that technology in a moment, but for now I'm trying to trace a certain growth—a certain education. Writers of your generation generally eschewed writing about the word—about literature—for writing about the image. This shift can be attributed to market forces or just to a bid for relevance in a culture whose imagination was becoming increasingly pictorial. Regardless, this writing was on my shelves (in books) and in my mailbox (in magazines and newspapers), and what struck me the most about reading it (besides the glibness of its popular incarnation in film and TV reviews, and the pretentiousness of its academic incarnation in the field of "media studies") was the feeling that most of it was already historical, if not already obsolete—the feeling that the philosophical concerns that the writers of your generation had framed around the image had become, for everyone of my generation, all of whom were becoming writers and image-makers, real and actual *problems*. The debate about whether depictions of things were, or could be considered, or should be considered, things; the debate about whether a reproducible work would ever be capable of critiquing the culture of reproducibility, without becoming complicit in it—what had once been the abstruse or at best theoretical speculations of a minuscule elite were now practical matters online, practical anxieties afflicting everyone with a Facebook account, or everyone

who had a friend with a Facebook account. As digital technology diffused faster and wider than even photographic technology had during the century before, there was a sense among millennials that if we didn't assert our individualities online, we'd be left behind and lost. We'd become the new philosophical concerns—strictly theoretical.

I admit to feeling this way myself, and it was because I felt this way that I wanted to become a writer: I wanted to write books. To identify with the word under the sign of the image was my rebellion. I wasn't quite sure how to do it, however. I wasn't quite sure what writing had to be done. None of my reading gave me any guidance or model. None of the writers I was reading, whether in fiction or nonfiction or even in any genre-hybridity, was dealing with digital culture—which was presenting itself as the apotheosis of literary culture—in any way that appeared recognizable, let alone sustainable. All of them were either panicking or complaining or trying to ignore it or just waving the white flag of the page, surrendering, and going under.

That's when I returned to photography, Stephen—to your photography. I found your work, I admit it, online. In your photographs, and in the photographs of a few of your cohort, I found a "language" or "voice" that seemed both personal and impersonal at once—the sincerest simulation I've ever encountered of what it might mean to be "unbiased." I wondered how you did that, how you seemed to sidestep judgment by standing still—I wondered, to get to the heart of my curiosity, why certain interstates and suburban intersections and diner sandwiches and motor inn toilets that American literature, along with my own American life, had always instructed me to regard as lonely or bereft, appeared, through the steadiness of your hand and eye, almost noble. Uncowed. Unashamed. Proud and yet serene. The answer (I can hear you saying it under your breath) is "form." The answer (obviously) is "structure."

Your work takes the detritus of our American surroundings—our power lines and telephone poles and advertising signage and the shadows they all cast—and returns it, through neutral observation, to its fundamental existence as geometry: lines and angles, planes and solids. You look at a curb, a bag, a bed, a plate and cutlery, and, in time, they become what they've always been, or what they always might have been if anyone had looked before: a horizon, a vanishing point, a frame. The result, for the viewer, or for this viewer, is paradoxical: instead of being estranged from my environment, I'm brought closer. Instead of being defamiliarized, I'm empowered. This, then, is the lesson I owe you for: that the mass chaos I perceive all around me is merely a choice of my perception, and that it doesn't have to be a burden but a challenge, as to whether I myself am able to derive from it its inherent usable form—its inherently humanizing, logical, even beautiful form, which is only to be found through engagement, not reaction.

I thank you for that, Stephen.

Have a happy happy seventieth birthday.

Yours,
Joshua Cohen

STEPHEN SHORE is a photographer whose retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is on view Nov. 19, 2017–May 28, 2018. See Contributors page.

JOSHUA COHEN is a novelist living in New York. See Contributors page.

All photos © Stephen Shore. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

New York City

1964



I was fifteen or sixteen when I made this picture. I think I had an innate structural sense—an analytic sense of form. In this early image I see the two threads that have run through my work over the years: cultural observation and formal experimentation.

Los Angeles, California

1969



Because I was aware of my tendency toward formal organization of space, I wanted to find an approach that didn't feel as though I was imposing an order on the image. I wanted a picture that didn't feel weighed down by visual convention.

Dallas, Texas

June 1972



How could I make an image that felt "natural"? I wanted to be able to take a photograph that seemed like seeing. As practice and as a reference, at random moments during the day I reminded myself to be aware of my field of vision. I essentially took a screenshot of my field of vision. I let this guide my picture-making in this series, "American Surfaces."

Church Street and Second Street, Easton, Pennsylvania

June 20, 1974



This was made with an 8x10 view camera. The amount of detail produced by this camera led to an altered approach to the image. I could rely on the picture's resolution to describe small details. Instead of having to come close in and allude to seeing, I could stand back and create a small world full of detail, which a viewer could move their attention through and explore.

Brewster County, Texas
1987



How can a flat photographic reproduction communicate an illusion of deep space?

Sderot

September 14, 2009



Technological change can open aesthetic possibilities. As high-end digital cameras as small as a 35mm were developed, images with small-camera spontaneity but large-camera detail have become possible. This is a photograph that couldn't have been made five years before. A more recent example of the expanded possibilities afforded by technological innovation is the image on the magazine's cover. This is from my latest series. It was made with a Hasselblad X1D, a handheld camera whose pictures have more subtle tonality and higher resolution than those from my old 8x10.

Place de la Concorde, Paris, France
May 25, 2017



With the ubiquity of the smartphone, nearly everyone has a camera with them all the time. Every remote village with a mobile phone signal or Wi-Fi is connected. Instagram has seven hundred million monthly users. It's become a platform for visual communities. For the past three years, the major focus of my work has been taking pictures to be posted on Instagram.