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Morphing Bodies: Strategies of Embodiment in Contemporary US Cultural Practices

Stephen Shore, Museum of Modern Art. November 19, 2017–May 28, 2018

Curated by Quentin Bajac, the Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator, Department of Photography, with Kristen Gaylord, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow, Department of Photography

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- ¹ Heralded as "the most comprehensive exhibition ever organized of photographer Stephen Shore's work," MoMA's ambitious retrospective on the major 20th-century artist leads visitors through the different phases of his photographic practice (from the 1960s to today, from black and white to color, from the mundane to the gigantic)—in an apparently exhaustive and willingly interactive way.
- ² The first room offers a glimpse of Stephen Shore's precocity. The 16-year-old high school dropout regularly photographed the streets of Manhattan and the Factory, where he spent most of his time from 1961 until 1967. 54 photographs out of this immense bulk are exhibited. Mostly black and white stolen moments, these untitled portraits or more classical, straight-line views of architectural details are organized in a chronological line reminiscent of an analogic roll. The display, designed like a drafting table, also hints at a style in the making, an impression reinforced by the subject of his Factory snapshots depicting members such as Lou Reed, Gerard Malanga, and Edie Sedgwick engaged in creating music, installations or movies. The text underlines Andy Warhol's influence on the young photographer, whose enduring obsession with series visible in the following room.
- ³ This second space opts for continuity with the former, with 10 series (ranging from 2 to 49 views) of framed prints arranged as contact-sheets. Capturing his trips with friends (*Los Angeles, California, February 4, 1969* prefigures his work on color and American spaces) or his parents (*Ruth Shore* and *Fred Shore*, 1970), we are told that these short stories are "detached" and "resist all narrative temptation." However, they tell much of the photographer's eye, as this multiplicity of mundane moments expands the

potential diversity of the photographic scope—through the apparently random occurrences Shore chose to capture.

- 4 Such diversity of forms and the refusal of the hierarchization of images also dictate the content of the third room. Entitled *All the Meat You Can Eat*, after the 1971 exhibition Shore organized to encompass the polymorphous nature of the photographic medium, it also mirrors its original staging resembling a *cabinet de curiosités*. This is the show's first evidence of Shore's marked interest in images taken by others, and a good example of the immersive quality the exhibit strives to achieve. This dizzying, perplexing and often amusing superposition of postcards, strangers' family photos, leaflets—of American Main Streets and landscapes, of the military, of the youth, of erotica, in black and white and in color, from all times and in all sizes—questions matters of authorship, and displays a curatorial, authoritative outlook. It also reminds us of Stephen Shore's foregrounding role in the making of the image-obsessed society we live in.
- 5 *American Surfaces*, 1972–1973, the following room, also unfolds this type of narrative. Shore approached color photography as a way to grow closer to his public, and the display of the room reflects this accent on accessibility. There are no labels on the wall (only plastic sheets to be collected at each room's entrance) to accompany the numerous pictures in standard format and chromogenic prints, which are displayed in three lines. This plainly illustrates Shore's ambition "to free himself from certain photographic conventions: the concept of photography as the art of creating isolated and 'significant' images, perfect framing, and the expressive subjectivity of the photographer," as the accompanying text states—an ambition already apparent in the second room. The mundanity of the subjects also illustrates this ambition, from daily portraits to promotional-like city views, titled by location and date. What starts to emerge, however, is a growing absence of the human presence, with the recurrence of half-eaten meals with no eater in sight, of deserted motel rooms and of the occasional sullied toilet bowl.
- 6 This absence is then confirmed in the following room. *Uncommon Places* (1973–1982) gathers Shore's perhaps most famous photographs which put color photography, previously disdained as an art form, on the map. The larger, more classical prints give an impressive dimension to this ambitious project spanning ten years. None of the photographer's former obsessions are abandoned: the subjects remain the same, mundane as ever, albeit devoid of human presence; serial experimentation is still at the core of his photographic process, as demonstrated by the variations on light and dimensions executed on *Holden Street, North Adams, Massachusetts, July 13, 1974*, of which four prints are centrally presented side by side. This series nonetheless marks a tipping point in Shore's career, also linking him to more institutional streams of American photography (namely the American New Color Photography movement). *Uncommon Places*, compared to *American Surfaces*, thus illustrates how placement, printing and size can modify the viewer's relationship to Shore's snapping of a certain idea of blue-skied, car-filled, sunny America.
- 7 Putting forth the artist's experimentation with commission work, the next room considers from a different angle the idea that format, more than subject, shapes perception. It confirms the visitor's intuition that Shore's work is more intellectual and conceptual than his taste for clean lines, light colors and broad focus lets on. Indeed, be it in his participation to the *Court House: A Photographic Document* group project,

represented here by interiors such as *Greene County, Greensboro, Georgia, January 28, 1976*, or exteriors such as *Hampshire County, Romney, West Virginia, February 27, 1976*, or in the views of Giverny's Monet gardens (1977), the aesthetic filiation with his non-commissioned work is vibrant, confirming that Stephen Shore's vision is as much present in his more commercial work.

- 8 Such an admiration for the still-image form is patent in *The Nature of Photographs*. The room displays images which Shore selected to form a book, as part of his teaching practice (since 1982, he has been the director of the photography program at Bard College). Once again, diversity and multiplicity prevail, and, there, he stresses explicitly that forms are photographic tools to apprehend a content. This time, however, the superposition of images is not dizzying but offers rather a sinuous path through which one can walk the history of photography, from Walker Evans's straight documentary style of the 1930s to Thomas Struth's round, faded-colored *Pantheon, Rome* (1990), including Larry Fink's raw depiction of New York's essence and tellingly, some of Shore's own work. One could argue that institutional recognition may partly explain the much more appeased dimension of this enterprise, compared to the anarchic, energetic one of 1971.
- 9 Shore's works from the 1980s, *In the Wilderness* (1979–1993), however, still reflect a search for innovation. In this series, he draws a parallel between American landscapes of the "wilderness" and Mexican, Italian and Scottish ones, hung up back to back and decidedly empty, for the most part, of human presence. Matters of composition (with a straight horizon line varying from high to low, and from horizontal to diagonal) are enhanced by the large format of the prints, imposing their strong presence in which land eats up the space, almost spilling from the frame.
- 10 Contrasting with this overwhelming experience, the next room presents a lighter project. Entitled *Instant Photography, 2003 to Today*, it displays 20 Internet print-on-demand books hung from the ceiling, offered for consumption in a mimicry of the digital era that is not ironic, but rather another democratic venture on Shore's part. Dialoguing with iPads, that allows viewers to browse through Shore's very active Instagram account, they sketch the image of a photographer still marveling at the renewed possibility in the realm of images, rather than a clear aesthetic stance.
- 11 The last room, in turn, offers a stark return of the human presence in Shore's photography, with his 2012 Ukraine documentary series, featuring some striking close-up portraits of a disappearing generation and their interiors. On the two opposing walls, however, Israel and the West Bank's 2010 landscapes, mostly taken from above, propose a destabilizing counter-narrative. At the heart of this room, the series *Archeology* (1996) may offer an explanation for these apparently opposed productions. Grey, extremely detailed and textured photographs of a land in the process of revealing its buried secret, they signal the undeniably growing importance of recording traces of things past (once again, from all times and all places, without a hierarchy). In the light of the previous room, unabashedly looking towards the future, and that the visitors have to go through to access this last part of the exhibit, such an inflection is of particular importance, and closes the show on a major, intentional question mark representative of the whole endeavor.
- 12 How much of an experience this broad exhibit represents is one of its most notable features—such an experience varying according to each viewer. Indeed, with all photographs hung up at eye level, the MoMA's take on Stephen Shore's life-long work

can be either a pick-and-choose stroll through a coherent chain of foregrounding projects, or an intellectual venture aided by numerous texts and extended labels (in which case, the scale of the show makes it a bit overwhelming). Its overall interactivity, demonstrated by the presence of iPads but also of stereo viewers in the largest, central room, and of audio recordings of the artist reading his book in the *Nature of Photographs* room, makes it accessible to a wide variety of publics, including children. This interactivity is in line with Shore's vision of the medium. It is even perpetuated beyond the museum, through its social media campaigns, as well as through the abundance of Instagram and Snapchat selfies taken in front of the master's prints by a sizable part of the visiting crowd. In these ways, the exhibit seems to pay Stephen Shore the most appropriate of homages.

Installation view of *Stephen Shore*

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 19, 2017–May 28, 2018

© 2017 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Robert Gerhardt

Stephen Shore, *4-Part Variation*, 1969

32 gelatin silver prints, printed 2013, each 12.7 x 17.8 cm, acquired through the generosity of Robert B. Menschel

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Stephen Shore, *St. Anthony's Hospital, 735 N. Polk, 1971*

Offset lithograph, 8.9 x 14 cm, gift from the artist

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

Chromogenic color print, 30.5 x 38.4 cm, gift from Joseph G. Mayer Fund
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Stephen Shore, *Greene County Court House, Greensboro, Georgia, January 28, 1976, 1976*

Chromogenic color print, 24.6 x 19.5 cm, gift from Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc., Seagram County Court House Archives

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Stephen Shore, *County of Sutherland, Scotland, 1988*, 1988

Chromogenic color print, 19.5 x 24.6 cm, gift from The Family of Man Fund
© 2018 Stephen Shore

Stephen Shore, *County of Sutherland, Scotland, 1988, 1988*

Chromogenic color print, 90.2 × 115.6 cm, Gift of Susan and Arthur Fleischer, Jr.
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Installation view of *Stephen Shore*

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© 2017 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Robert Gerhardt

Stephen Shore, *Sderot, Israel, September 14, 2009, 2009*

Chromogenic color print, 40.6 × 50.8 cm, gift from the artist

© 2018 Stephen Shore

Stephen Shore, *Beitin, West Bank, January 13, 2010*, 2010

Chromogenic color print, 91.3 x 114.2 cm), gift from the artist
© 2018 Stephen Shore

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