Stephen Shore

MoMA

Stephen Shore

Quentin Bajac

With additional texts by David Campany,
Kristen Gaylord, and Martino Stierli

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As a partner of contemporary art at MoMA, Allianz is proud to sponsor the first exhibition in the United States to encompass the full range of photographer Stephen Shore's work, from the 1970s to the present day.

Allianz encourages people to explore new territories and to expand the boundaries they encounter, as we believe that there is no progress without risk-taking. Our engagement with the art of today reflects this belief, and we are honored to support exhibitions of contemporary artists who push the limits of their disciplines as they challenge expectations and conventions.

Throughout his career, Shore has been a true explorer of his medium, experimenting with a wide variety of photographic styles and formats: from the gritty black-and-white street photographs he made as a teenager, to the meticulously composed color images he shot with a view camera starting in the 1970s, to the iPhone pictures he has posted almost daily on his Instagram feed in recent years.

Stephen Shore's work reveals the uncommon in the ordinary and helps us to see the world differently, through the eyes of an artist. We hope viewers of this exhibition will gain inspiration from this extraordinary photographer's lifelong practice of reinvention and exploration in pursuit of his vision.

Jean-Marc Pailhol
Head of Group Market Management & Distribution
Allianz SE

The Museum of Modern Art first acquired Stephen Shore's work in 1962, when Edward Steichen, the director of the Department of Photography, purchased three photographs from the artist, who was only fourteen at the time. Since then, Shore has become one of the most significant photographers of his generation, and central to the Museum's collecting and presenting of the photographic medium. In 1976 Shore had one of his first solo museum exhibitions here, and in 2013 MoMA organized a major acquisition of the photographer's work. Given his long history with the Museum, I am delighted to share this volume, published on the occasion of *Stephen Shore*, the most comprehensive exhibition of his work ever organized.

Quentin Bajac, The Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography, conceived of this important project, and his vision reveals the breadth and diversity of the artist's work. I offer thanks to him and to Kristen Gaylord, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow, who assisted with all aspects of the exhibition and the publication. I am also grateful to author and curator David Campany and to Martino Stierli, The Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, for their insightful contributions to this catalogue.

A project this ambitious is made possible only through the generosity of sponsors and lenders. We owe particular thanks to Allianz for its significant contribution to realizing this exhibition. Major support was also provided by The William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund; The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art; our Committee Chairman, David Dechman, and Michel Mercure; and the Jo Carole Lauder Publications Fund. I am grateful to the Committee on Photography for its sustained commitment to building the Museum's collection of Shore's work.

And, finally, on behalf of the Board of Trustees, I am honored to salute Stephen Shore for his extraordinary career, and to thank him for entrusting its presentation to MoMA. It is always a privilege to work with contemporary artists, and the resourcefulness and good humor Shore brought to the project made the process all the more enjoyable.

Glenn D. Lowry
Director
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Stephen Shore: Solving Pictures
Quentin Bajac

"Whenever I find myself copying myself—making pictures whose problems I've already solved—I give myself new issues to pursue."[1] Always moving forward, never locking into any single style, and seeing each image as a problem to solve: these practices have defined Stephen Shore's work for the past fifty years, regardless of his techniques or processes, whether shooting in color or black and white, using a view camera or posting images on Instagram. At the age of seventy, Shore is both one of the most influential and one of the most elusive American photographers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a seeming paradox. After spearheading the movement known as the New Color Photography in the United States in the 1970s and directing the photography department at Bard College since 1982, Shore became a major catalyst in the renewal of documentary photography in the late 1990s, both in the United States and Europe—especially in Germany, where his work had struck a chord from the very beginning. Like the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher before him, Shore synthesized local photographic history (in his case, an American tradition spanning from Carleton Watkins to Walker Evans) with influences from various artistic movements, from Conceptual to Pop and even Photo-Realism.

The recognition of Shore's importance, however, is offset by the fact that the full range of his work remains unknown or misunderstood, too often reduced to his 1970s photographs of everyday American subjects. This can be explained by several factors, not the least of which is his lack of a clearly identifiable style. Shore's refusal to repeat himself has led him to seek out a new direction as soon as a style—that is, the combination of an approach and a subject—seems to be firmly in place, or when the visual solutions to a problem have become obvious to him and the pleasure of resolving the problem has vanished. His shifts between color and black and white, his use of both analog and digital, and his constant variation of scale and subject characterize a visually disparate body of work in which the prevailing rule seems to be the absence of rules. The black-and-white portraits taken at Warhol's Factory in the mid-1960s appear to be very unlike the large color landscapes of Montana from the 1980s, which in turn look quite different from the print-on-demand books he began in 2003.

The constantly changing nature of his work has sometimes been problematic for Shore; he has explained, for instance, how several of

his galleries turned their backs on him when, after completing his series *Uncommon Places* in the early 1980s, he decided to open a new chapter. The variety of his output helps explain the unusual path his career has taken. Despite an extremely precocious beginning—selling three photographs to The Museum of Modern Art when he was a teenager and having his first solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the age of twenty-three are part of his legendary backstory—Shore was largely overlooked in the 1980s and a good part of the 1990s. *American Surfaces*, now acknowledged as one of his most significant series, was not published until 1999, twenty-seven years after it was completed, and photography's wunderkind had to wait until the 2000s to see his photographs shown with any regularity. The true discovery of his work came only after he was fifty, largely through his admirers in Germany—and we might argue that he is still better known in Europe than in the United States.

The difficulty in grasping Shore's work as a whole has been heightened by the photographer's penchant for reinvention. In the past fifteen years, he has consistently revisited his own oeuvre, taking advantage of new technical possibilities, releasing ever more exhaustive publications of his best-known photographs, printing images from the 1970s in new sizes, and publishing print-on-demand books devoted to some of his past images. This constant reworking points to a photographer who has never been boxed in by a single approach and considers all of his work, whether current or past, to be alive and in flux. Although since 2000 a common misconception has arisen of Shore as a staunch defender of contact prints in the tradition of small-scale photography, he has repeatedly explained that, from the 1970s on, he has varied the dimensions of his prints and, more recently, has embraced new digital tools that he wishes he had had at his disposal thirty years earlier.

The somewhat inscrutable nature of his work is due to its level of detachment, which critics of *Uncommon Places* found unsettling from the start: Shore's images seemed to achieve a kind of perfect neutrality, both in their subject matter and their approach. Among the new American color photographers, he was undoubtedly the hardest to pin down and the most enigmatic, without the obsessiveness of William Christenberry, the picturesque qualities of Helen Levitt, the sensuality of Joel Meyerowitz, the baroque complexity of William Eggleston, or the narrative clarity of Joel Sternfeld. Even Shore's soft color tended toward the monochrome, staying true to a concept of photography as an art of transparency. It was this idea of "document as form" that John Szarkowski, head of the photography department at MoMA, was making the center of his program just as Shore was getting his start.[2] There are no heroics in Shore's images, but rather a poetics of the ordinary and the everyday and a refusal to create an effect for its own sake, echoing Walker Evans's desire to reveal the "deep beauty in things as they are."[3] His approach can be tied to a long American tradition of elevating the simple and the commonplace, in form as well as content, to a certain poetry and a way of life, from Ralph Waldo Emerson writing that "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low,"[4] to Walt Whitman championing "a perfectly transparent, plate-glassy style, artless," characterized by "clearness, simplicity, no twistified or foggy sentences."[5] Despite its historical context, this enthusiasm for the vernacular, when expressed through photography, has been unsettling for some observers, and continues to be today.

The apparently unfathomable quality of Shore's photographs should not, however, obscure the fact that his work is founded on ideas that he uses to resolve the "problem" presented by each image. So, rather than trying to unify his oeuvre, we should accept it in all its diversity, seeing it as the result not of a style but simply of rules or practices. The first of these is his search for maximum clarity, which has been evident since the 1970s, when he began using an 8-by-10 camera, and is now furthered by the technical advances of digital cameras that allow for extreme precision but are much easier to handle than traditional view cameras. Shore abstains from retouching and reframing, showing the same kind of respect Henri Cartier-Bresson did for the shot as the key moment in the photographic act. Another guiding principle in the vast majority of his photographs is a respect—one might say a mystical respect—for natural light; his work does not include images taken at night, and, except in his early work, he very rarely uses artificial light or a flash. Shore has always had a preference for horizontal (or now, with Instagram, square) formats, which he considers better suited to his natural vision than vertical formats, of which there are very few examples in his work. But perhaps the most consistent of his practices is the discipline he exercises in limiting his number of shots as much as possible, a habit that owes a great deal to his use of the view camera: one shot of a given subject, and very little editing afterward. All in all, Shore's approach to photography is both transparent and contemplative, and marked by a willful economy of means. He likens the process of shooting photographs to one of his favorite activities: fishing. "I've found through experience that whenever—or so it seems—my attention wanders or I look away then surely a fish will rise to the fly and I will be too late setting the hook. I watch the fly calmly and attentively so that when the fish strikes—I strike. Then the line tightens, the playing of the fish begins, and time stands still. Fishing, like photography, is an art that calls forth intelligence, concentration, and delicacy."[6]

Shore has not yet been honored with a major retrospective in the United States, one that encompasses the diversity of his work, although a survey of his photographs recently traveled to several cities in Europe.[7] The current exhibition and catalogue aim to shed new light on his photography by presenting little-known and even never-reproduced pictures alongside deservedly famous series. The former include an exhibition of vernacular photography called *All the Meat You Can Eat*, which Shore organized in 1971, a true atlas of forms and ideas for his future work; editorial photographs that testify to the porous boundaries between his commissioned and personal images and illustrate the range of his work; stereoscopic images from 1974, which demonstrate his interest in constructing perspectival space; and landscapes, from natural, pared-down pictures of the American West to more domesticated views of the Hudson Valley to photographs taken outside the United States, as in his series of the Yucatán, Mexico, and Luzzara, Italy. The exhibition also features a number of images from Shore's Instagram posts, the latest expression of his longtime enthusiasm for popular forms of photography.

While the exhibition follows a chronological trajectory, the catalogue takes an intentionally different approach, one that sets it apart from other publications on or by Shore. Organized as an encyclopedia, the fifty-nine separate entries by four different authors bring together both overviews and details—discussions of the work overall, along with analyses of the specific images, people and places, publications and exhibitions, and themes and patterns that have constituted his career in photography. The structure of an encyclopedia allows the emphasis to be put on the leitmotifs that characterize his body of work, while its systematic and neutral perspective serves as a tribute to the descriptive, nonjudgmental approach of Shore himself. Rounding out the volume are research tools consisting of a detailed bibliography, a comprehensive list of Shore's exhibitions, and an extremely thorough photographic chronology compiled partially from travel logs the photographer kept during his trips. This publication aims to provide an image of Stephen Shore and his work with clarity, precision, and detail, like a photograph taken with an 8-by-10 view camera.

1. "Shifting Focus—The Decade Interview: Stephen Shore," Phaidon.com, February 4, 2011, www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/picture-galleries/2011/february/04/shifting-focus-the-decade-interview-stephen-shore/.
2. Olivier Lugon, *Le Style documentaire* (Paris: Macula, 2001), 372.
3. James R. Mellow, "Walker Evans Captures the Unvarnished Truth," *New York Times*, December 1, 1974, D37.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," 1837, Digital Emerson: A Collective Archive, http://digitalemerson.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/text/the-american-scholar.
5. Walt Whitman, "Rules for Composition," early 1850s, The Walt Whitman Archive, http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/transcriptions/duk.00130.html.
6. Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places* (New York: Aperture, 1982), 63.
7. The traveling exhibition *Stephen Shore* was shown at Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid, and four other European venues, from September 2014 to September 2016. The last large exhibition of Shore's work in the United States was the Aperture Foundation's traveling exhibition *The Biographical Landscape: The Photography of Stephen Shore 1968–1993*, which focused primarily on his American photographs of the 1970s.

All the Meat You Can Eat

All the Meat You Can Eat took place November 8–20, 1971, at the 98 Greene Street Loft, a noncommercial alternative space in SoHo. The venue was started in 1969 by Holly and Horace Solomon, two art collectors who were also interested in theater, and the young Shore met them among Andy Warhol's entourage at the Factory. The Solomons hoped to break down barriers between disciplines by hosting not only exhibitions but also performances, theatrical productions, and poetry readings at the loft. Gordon Matta-Clark, Charles Simonds, Dennis Oppenheim, Bill Beckley, Bernadette Mayer, and Peter Schjeldahl all showed there—or showed up there—during the four years of the gallery's existence.

Embracing a century of photography, *All the Meat You Can Eat* was composed largely of found images collected by Shore and two friends, Weston Naef, then a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Michael Marsh, an Amarillo native whom Shore met indirectly through Warhol's Factory. Featured in the exhibition were police photos of crime scenes; postcards; pages from interior design magazines; erotic and pornographic shots of various types (amateur, professional, reproduced on playing cards); ID photos; pictures of pets; commercial portraits; advertising images; press, fashion, and society photos (by Cecil Beaton and others); propaganda posters; and a photo of the American West by Eadweard Muybridge. The show also included images taken by Shore, such as shots taken with a Mick-a-Matic camera and color photos that would serve as the basis for the postcards in his series *Greetings from Amarillo, "Tall in Texas."*

With images framed or, most often, attached directly to the wall in grids or in sets and series, the presentation was deliberately dissonant; genres mixed and clashed with no apparent logic. *All the Meat You Can Eat* seemed emblematic of a new aesthetic marked by popular forms of photography, which Shore would embrace in *American Surfaces*, a series he undertook in March 1972, four months after the exhibition. As the photography critic Gene Thornton noted in the only published review, these images were selected not for their aesthetic appeal but for their contribution to the all-and-sundry nature of this production,

a collection of pictures of a type rarely seen on the walls of galleries or museums. "Stephen Shore's fascinating selection is a healthy, if possibly somewhat unwelcome, reminder of the part that photography really plays in the world," Thornton wrote.[1] In 2004, Shore would reuse some of the postcards shown in *All the Meat* for one of his print-on-demand books, *Civic Architecture: Postcard Series.* (Quentin Bajac)

See also: *Amarillo, Texas*; *American Surfaces*

1. Gene Thornton, "From Fine Art to Plain Junk," *New York Times*, November 14, 1971, D38.
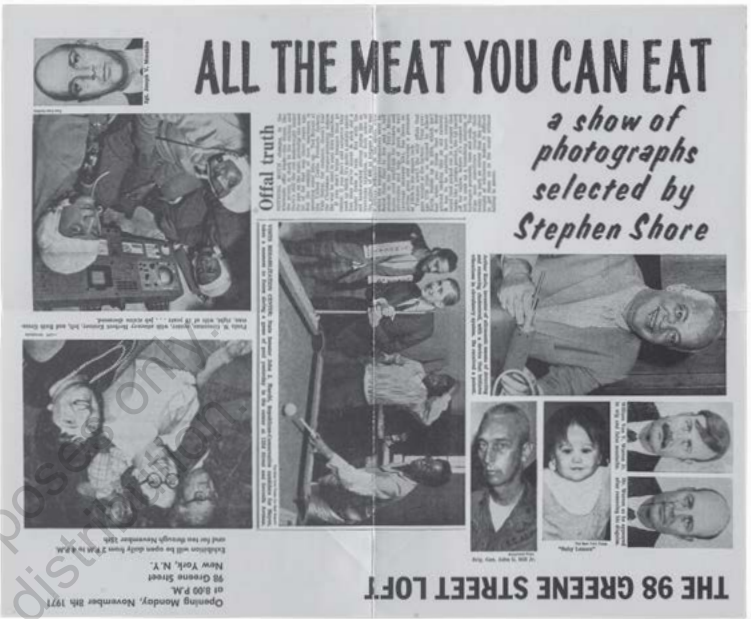
Poster for *All the Meat You Can Eat*, 98 Greene Street Loft, New York, November 8–20, 1971

Installation views of *All the Meat You Can Eat*, 98 Greene Street Loft, New York, November 8–20, 1971

Material from *All the Meat You Can Eat*, **98 Greene Street Loft, New York,**
November 8–20, 1971

Amarillo, Texas

Immortalized in the lyrics of "Route 66" by Bobby Troup, Amarillo, Texas, occupies a special place in the mythology of Shore's rural America. From 1969 to 1978, Amarillo was an essential stop in his summer travels through the southern and western United States. It was there that he stayed with his friend Michael Marsh, a native of Amarillo who spent the summer months at the family's ranch surrounded by friends and artists. Michael's brother, Stanley, a banker and heir to an oil and gas fortune, was an eccentric personality. Both an art collector and an artist in his leisure time, Stanley commissioned sculptures for the property from the Ant Farm collective, with whom he collaborated; from John Chamberlain, with whom Shore was friendly and traveled to England during this period; and from Robert Smithson (*Amarillo Ramp*, his last work).

Shore's first summers in Amarillo were crucial to his discovery of rural America and his decision to undertake a photographic exploration of it: "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."[1] Images made in Amarillo also appear in his two large color series from the 1970s, *American Surfaces* and *Uncommon Places*, including one of his best-known portraits, a photograph of Michael Marsh and his wife, Sandy (page 180).

During his third summer in Amarillo, in 1971, Shore created his first project in color, *Greetings from Amarillo, "Tall in Texas,"* a series of ten postcards of sites in the city, from public buildings to banal streetscapes, all photographed with a 35mm camera (pages 19–21). The identifications on the back of the cards include the name of the building or street but systematically omit the name of the city, thus creating a generic set of images representing the typical American town. Shore had 5,600 sets of the cards (packaged in their own case) manufactured at Dexter Press of West Nyack, New York, one of the country's best-known postcard printers.

Although *Greetings from Amarillo* was a commercial failure and was exhibited to relative indifference in 1972 at Thomas Gibson Fine Art in London (and at Light Gallery in New York the following year),

the postcard sets were purchased by a number of Pop artists at the time, including David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj, and Edouardo Paolozzi. Later, Shore would reuse some of the unsold postcards, inserting them surreptitiously in postcard stands in cities he passed through during his travels, and he would occasionally receive them back in the mail, sent by friends. In 2007 Shore would devote one of his print-on-demand books, *11-1-07*, to Amarillo. (Quentin Bajac)

See also: *All the Meat You Can Eat*; *American Surfaces*; *Conceptual Sequences*; *Uncommon Places*

1. David Campany, "Ways of Making Pictures," in Marta Dahó, ed., *Stephen Shore* (Madrid: Fundación MAPFRE; New York: Aperture, 2014), 29.

Amarillo, Texas, July 1972. 1972

American National Bank Building, 7th & Tyler. 1971

19.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 1972. 1972

Chicago, Illinois, July 1972. 1972

New York, New York, March–April 1973. 1973

Chicago, Illinois, July 1972. 1972

Chicago, Illinois, July 1972. 1972

Pontiac, Michigan, July 1972. 1972

25.

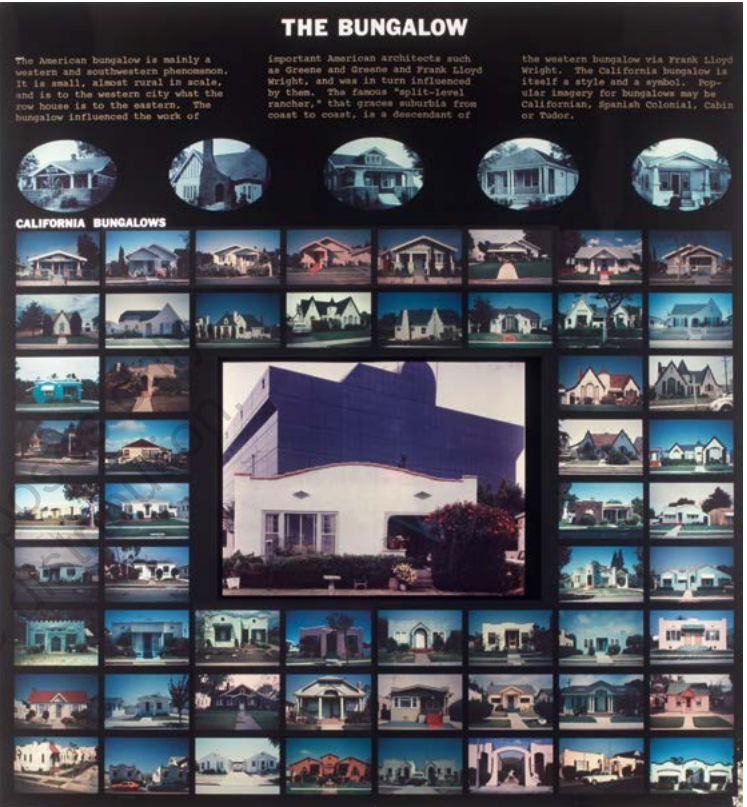*Aquileia, Italy, 1997. 1997*

Ashkelon, Israel, 1996. 1996

41.

Hatzor, Israel, 1996. 1996

Farmington, New Mexico, June 1972. 1972

Carrillos, New Mexico, June 1972. 1972

Tucumcari, New Mexico, July 1972. 1972

Winslow, Arizona, September 19, 2013. 2013

45.

"The Rest of New York," *The Real World*, July/August 1976

Transparency with photographs by Stephen Shore and others, from *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*, organized by Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown, 1976

Meeting Street, Charleston, South Carolina, August 3, 1975. 1975

49.

Front cover: Stephen Shore. *U.S. 93, Wikieup, Arizona, December 14, 1976*. 1976. Chromogenic color print, printed 2013, 17 × 21 3/4" (43.2 × 55.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Thomas and Susan Dunn

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