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AN ONLINE PHOTOGRAPHY MAGAZINE: OBSERVATION FULL AND FELT

"[Photography] is the capture and projection of the delights of seeing; it is the defining of observation full and felt."
-Walker Evans

UNCOMMON PLACES: *An Interview with Stephen Shore*

January 2004
by Aaron Schuman

"Until I was twenty-three, I lived mostly in a few square miles in Manhattan. In 1972, I set out with a friend for Amarillo, Texas. I didn't drive, so my first view of America was framed by the passenger's window. It was a shock."
-Stephen Shore, 1982

In May 2004, Aperture released *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*, a revised and expanded version of Stephen Shore's masterwork. Nearly one-hundred images were added to the book's original forty plates, finally revealing the true diversity and complexity of Shore's initial vision.

Uncommon Places: The Complete Works
by Stephen Shore

Available from Aperture: www.aperture.org

AS = Aaron Schuman
SS = Stephen Shore

AS: To start, I wanted to ask you about a very early experience in your career. I understand that you sold your first photograph at the age of fourteen, to Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art. Firstly, why was Steichen looking at a fourteen-year-old's photographs, and what was the photograph that he bought?

SS: He was looking at it because I called him up. I think I didn't know any better; I didn't know that you weren't supposed to do this. So I just called him up and said, "I'd like to show you my work!" He had a free appointment, so I went and showed him some pictures. They weren't very good, but he ended up buying three - there was a boy, sitting, holding his knee on a bench at the Met; three young boys looking at something and pointing; and a man carrying an ice barrel on his shoulder.

AS: When Andrew Hiller at Aperture approached you and said, "Let's do a project together", what made you decide to go back to Uncommon Places *and republish it as* The Complete Works, *rather than publishing a book of newer photographs. Did you feel that the 1982 edition was incomplete?*

SS: Well, Andrew said let's re-issue *Uncommon Places*, and I decided that I wanted to put more images in, because I knew that there were a lot more photographs—and I mean a lot more—that ought to be in it. There were very few space constraints in this new edition, so we got to pick all the pictures that we thought were important for the project.

AS: Several of the images in The Complete Works—*such as an aerial shot of Amarillo, Texas—are very similar to images in your Amarillo postcard series from 1971, or to images in* American Surfaces, *which you shot in 1972. At the time, were you retracing you steps and saying to yourself, "I want to shoot this again, but in 8x10"?*

SS: Yes, exactly. I did *American Surfaces*, and loved what I got. But when I first exhibited them, they were Kodak-produced snapshots. This was before the age of the one-hour photo machine, so Kodak had a plant in New Jersey where you would send your film, and you then got little glossy snapshots back in the mail. That's how they were originally exhibited. But then when I wanted to make larger prints, I found that the film just wasn't good enough to support even an 8"x10" print. It was just ridiculously grainy. So I needed to go to a larger negative.

I bought a hand-held 4x5—an old press camera—thinking that I would do American Surfaces, just with a Crown Graphic. And then found that, if I was taking a picture of a building or photographing an intersection, I would put the camera on a tripod. Once the camera was on a tripod, I started seriously looking at the ground-glass, and I found it fascinating. It began a process of formal evolution within my work that was completely unexpected. A series of questions started to arise. By the end of '73—which is when I started to use 4x5—I found that I never hand-held it anymore; I was only working on a tripod. So I figured that if I was going to work on a tripod, why not use an 8x10.

AS: So it seems that you were slightly resistant to go to a larger format, at least at first.

SS: Yeah, well it was never my intention to go to an 8x10. I mean it really was simply that I wanted to continue *American Surfaces* but with a larger negative. And I wasn't expecting to work on a tripod. I wasn't expecting to look at a ground-glass, and put a hood over my head. I really was going to do *American Surfaces* with a larger format. And then, I found that the larger format led me to discover other things about photographic seeing that I wanted to explore.

So that's kind of how it happened. Still, you'll see in the first 8x10 trip that many of the images are closely related to *American Surfaces*, but take full advantage of the descriptive power of the large-format camera; but yes, a lot of the contentual territory was staked out in *American Surfaces*.

AS: Did you find yourself going back to exactly the same spots?

SS: No. There were one or two cases where I happened to be in the same place. In *American Surfaces* there's a picture of a place in Saint Louis called the Mullah Temple, which is a Shriner temple. I photographed it with 35mm, and then went back with the 4x5 a year later and photographed it again. There are a couple of other cases where I re-photographed; even the cover of the new book. I photographed that picture before in 4x5, in the same spot, but there were some technical problems—a whole batch of film was mis-processed by the lab. So I went back the next year with an 8x10, and took this picture again. But there are very few instances of that; it's more in terms of general theme.

AS: And so all of the work from '73 is 4x5?

SS: All of '73 is 4x5. Two things are happening. One is, I'm essentially doing *American Surfaces* with a larger format. In the process, I found that some things were made more difficult. I mean, I took some good pictures of food with the 4x5, but it's a lot easier to go click [mimics taking a 35mm snapshot], than it is to get on top of a chair, and so on—the pancakes are cold by the time I'm finished. Then again, there are other things that can be done so much better with a 4x5. Even if I am doing a television set, I can do it with a different kind of detail. And especially if I'm photographing an intersection, I don't have to have a single point of emphasis in the picture. It can be complex, because it's so detailed that the viewer can take time and read it—look at something here, and look at something there. They can pay attention to a lot more. So I found myself loving working on a tripod, loving working with an 8x10, and the pictures changed. It was not simply that I was just doing American Surfaces with an 8x10 anymore. There were new things developing that started simply because I was using the 8x10. And that led to these explorations.

AS: Was that partly the result of the technical complexity and method imposed by the view camera?

SS: It was the result of thinking, and I see this with students all the time. Using the view camera forces conscious decision-making. You can't sort of stand somewhere—you stand exactly where you want to be. "Do I want it here, or do I want it there; two inches this way or two inches that way?" And also, you wind up using film that costs a lot. Today, with processing and a contact sheet, it's probably thirty dollars—back then, maybe fifteen dollars. I'm not going to take a picture here, and then a picture two inches over there when it's that expensive. I'm going to seriously consider which one I want. So what happens is, you begin to learn conscious decision-making and develop a taste for certainty.

AS: What I really enjoy about the new edition of Uncommon Places *is that, in the sequencing, you never develop a steady rhythm. The reader can never just start flipping without looking. The horizon lines are rarely on the same latitude on each page. They'll be a couple of landscapes, and then, all of a sudden, an interior or a portrait will show up. Every picture becomes a surprise when you turn the page, and I really love that aspect of this particular book. Seeing as it's organized in a way that's relatively chronological, did you shoot in this way, as well. I mean, would you just get bored of shooting intersections and say, "Now I'm going to shoot a television, or my hotel room, or my lunch"?*

SS: Well, I wasn't thinking, "Today, I'm going to shoot intersections." It was more like the way I worked with *American Surfaces*. In a day, I could photograph food, and some portraits, and a toilet, and some buildings. In a way, it's in this funny position of being a diary, but it's a diary of a life geared to making photographs. It's a diary of a photographic trip—it's things I'm encountering, but it's also things I'm encountering for the sake of encountering them. In *American Surfaces*, I was photographing almost every meal I ate, every person I met, every waiter or waitress who served me, every bed I slept in, every toilet I used. But also, I was photographing streets I was driving through, buildings I would see. I would pull over and say, "Okay, this is a picture I want." So it's not strictly a diary. In *American Surfaces*, I wasn't thinking, "Today, I'm just going to do portraits", and I didn't think that way during this project. In fact, what I felt about the original *Uncommon Places* is that a lot of those kinds of pictures were edited out; it was more architecture and intersections.

AS: Yes, the title obviously alludes to "places", but I've noticed that there are so many more interiors and details and portraits in the new edition.

SS: Yes, the picture of the pancakes and the portrait of my wife were included in the original, because as we were editing the book back then, I felt like, "How can we not include these pictures—even though they don't somehow fit in." The new edit is more in line with what I was thinking about and photographing all along. A lot of what I was looking at never made it into the original. In retrospect, the original gave a false impression of what was going on in the work.

AS: That's very interesting, because the original Uncommon Places *has inspired so much work since its publication—the Dusseldorf school, huge wall-size prints, the interest in suburban landscapes, and so on.*

SS: Well, I'm not turning my back on that work—it's all included in the new edition. It's just that the original ought to have been twice the size to include other stuff.

AS: The one thing that throws me, when I look through the new edition, is the emergence of many never-before-seen portraits. For me, the physical presence of a human face in a photograph has a certain resonance that something like a pancake or a lamppost doesn't have. How important do you feel that these portraits are to the whole project?

SS: I think they're in there to represent the balance of what I was paying attention to. How "important" are they? Well, in some ways they may be the most conventional pictures in there, but I just like them. I think they're good portraits.

Actually, what I was thinking about when you were asking the question was that there are a lot of portraits in *American Surfaces*, and I just love them. And they're not the kind of portraits that are about presenting the person as a three-dimensional character. They're almost looking at the people as surfaces, as cultural artefacts. And looking through *Uncommon Places*, I think that I went in a different direction with the portraits. Working on a tripod is very different for a portrait; generally people are less self-conscious, because there's not a camera between me and them. The camera is not an extension of me; it's this tool I'm using to make something. And I can pay more attention to them, because I'm not seeing them through a viewfinder. I'm seeing them with my eyes, and I'm choosing the moment just with my eyes, without a camera in between.

AS: How would you choose the people you photographed?

SS: I might have a camera set up to do a piece of architecture, and someone would walk by, and I start talking to them. You know, "What are you doing?" and I'll start talking to them. Or maybe it was at their homes. Maybe I was photographing a residential neighbourhood, and I'd photograph the people at their home.

AS: Often this work is interpreted in a very formal, graphic way, and obviously, those are very important qualities of the work. But sometimes people assume that the actual subject matter was not as important to you as the aesthetic structure, and I have always wondered if that's true, because it feels like the subject matter is really important.

SS: Oh yeah. It's just that sometimes people don't believe that you can do both at the same time.

AS: Because it seems like you love to make small visual jokes about the subject matter, about American culture—the "Stanley Lust Drive In", the billboard of a snow-capped mountain in an open field by the side of the road. There are a lot of subtle jokes.

SS: Yeah, but all of it was looking at the culture—the built culture—some of which is a remnant of something older with its own character, and some of which is modern American culture. I'm interested in all of this, but I can do that and do formal exploration at the same time. When someone says it's just formal, maybe it's easier for them to accept it as just formal, but I don't see where there is a problem with it being both.

JUL 06 1973

MILAGE: 1424
BREAKFAST: HOWARD JOHNSON'S, LIMA, OHIO (PANCAKES)
LUNCH: PONDEROSA STEAK HOUSE, BATTLE CREEK, MICH. (STEAK)
DINNER: HOWARD JOHNSON'S, BATTLE CREEK, MICH. (GUERRON DINNER)
NIGHT AT: HOWARD JOHNSON'S, BATTLE CREEK, MICH.

TV: CBS EVENING NEWS
60 MINUTES
ROOM 222

POST CARD DIST:
30 - DELPHOS, OHIO

10 EXPOSURES MADE:

AS: Walker Evans said that he wanted to "photograph the present as it would be seen as the past". But when he got older, and people would say, "I love your pictures; I remember those old Model T's!" and so on, it would drive him up the wall, because he didn't want his pictures to be seen as kitchy or old fashioned. He saw them as very modern, relevant, contemporary images. And I know that Uncommon Places *now evokes similar responses today. People say, "Awe, the '70s. Look at those great classic cars, look at those shag carpets, look at the great old signs, and all the bright colors!" Does that ever frustrate you—that people sometimes see this work as "kitchy" or "retro"?*

SS: No, but It's funny you said that. I didn't know Walker Evans felt this way, but that was done intentionally in my work. I realized that, in Evans' work, the time marker in his pictures were the cars. A building is not a time marker, because you could have a black and white picture of Madison Square, and people will say, "Was that picture taken in the twenties, or was it taken in 2003?" But in Evans, the cars were the little time markers, which I found fascinating. It didn't make his work nostalgic for me. It put it in a time perspective, and I would often include cars for that reason. I was intentionally putting a tag in for a general era.

AS: When I was doing research in the Walker Evans Archive, I found that he took very similar notes to yours, some of which you include at the end of the new edition of Uncommon Places. *For example, while on assignment for Sports Illustrated in the '60s, he wrote:*

"June 8: South Haven to Battle Creek by back roads. Photographed buildings in Grand Junction, RR Depot in Bloomingdale. Through Kalamazoo. Picnic lunch, slept in Post Tavern Hotel, Battle Creek. It is not very good. From train window, Ypsilanti and Dexter Mich. Have 19 Cent. Main streets that would be great to record…

"June 9: Arrive NY 9AM, To Life laboratories with 34 (?) rolls of 120 and 9 of 35mm color. Ordered a blue suit and 6 white shirts at Brooks. Very hot day. Home all afternoon."

…and so on. It's almost word for word, except for recording the television shows he watched.

SS: [Laughing] Yes, although I didn't make editorial comments, like, "It wasn't very good." But this is photographers. [Laughs again] I mean photography is an analytic discipline. It's accumulation; it's the resonance of facts.

AS: Okay, enough about Evans; please excuse the tangent. Let's talk about image size. I know that the original prints from Uncommon Places *were all 8x10 contact prints, and you've said that you liked the contact print because it was so dense and vibrant that it allowed even the smallest details to come alive—like the little boy in a window, or a small fallen cross in the middle of a field. They "pop", and you really notice them, even when they're extremely small.*

SS: Well, I'm going to counter a myth—which is promulgated some German curator friends of mine—that all of work was originally 8x10 contact prints. In 1975, I had a show where I had a 20x24 print; in '76, I had a one-man show of 16x20's. I made large prints all along, and I fluctuated on it. I just couldn't decide what worked best, since each had its qualities. There are some details that I know I'm paying attention to when I'm photographing, that simply can't be seen on a contact print. There's more information on a negative than you can see on a contact print. After a trip, I would sometimes make notes about what I was photographing, and then assign the pictures with these notes. I'd take a magnifying glass or a loop, and look at the license plates on cars. You see, sometimes they have county names on them, and there's no way you can see that on a print, but all that information is on the negative. A larger print expands the information; more of the stuff that I'm looking at is there for a viewer to see.

What I found attractive about the contact print was the almost surreal density of information; here's this thing that you can take in, in a couple of seconds. But, to actually stand on that spot, and look at every branch on a tree, and every shadow on a building, and all the pebbles on the road—this could take minutes of attention. It was as if fifteen minutes of attention had been compressed into this thing you can take absorb in a few seconds. That's what I mean by "surreal density" of information. I found that fascinating.

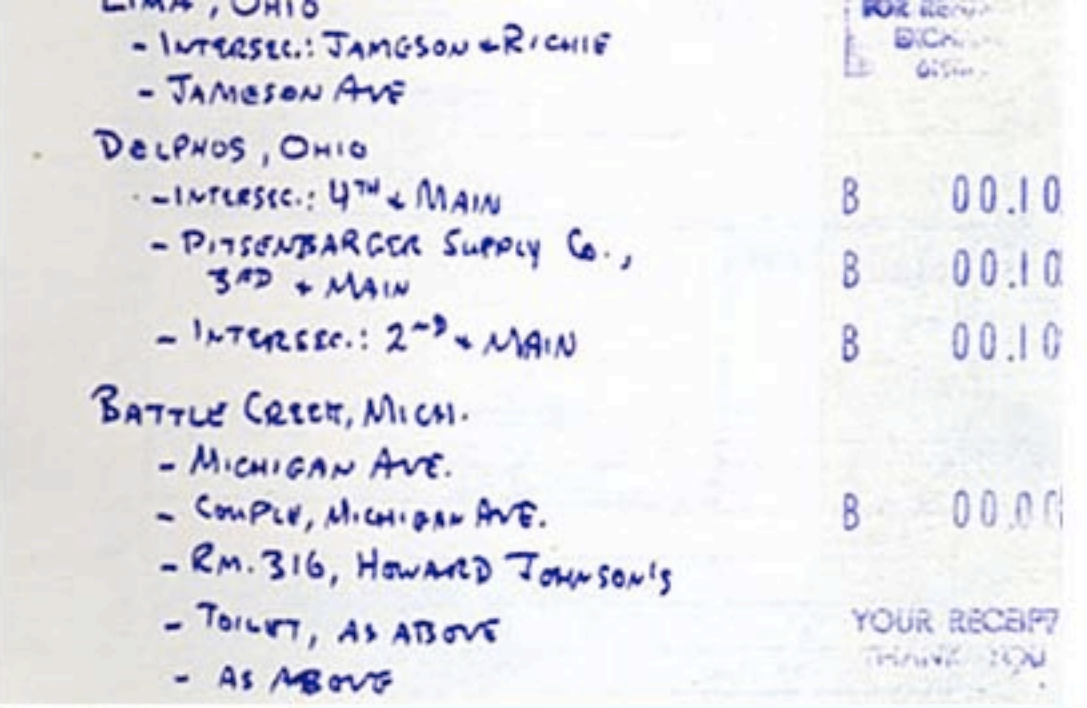
AS: When did you meet your wife?

SS: '76.

AS: And did she start traveling with you when you photographed?

SS: Occasionally. When it fit in with her job.

AS: Did that change the way you worked at all?



SS: No. I'm a maniac when I shoot. I mean, I'm focused like a laser beam, and I'm not the "loving boyfriend". I'm the "artist". She understood this—that if you're on a trip with me, the purpose of this trip was for me to make pictures, and I'm not going to be a nice guy or anything. I'm taking pictures. And if you're around, you're there to help me. In this picture [pointing at *Ginger Shore, 1977*], she's carrying my equipment. I used to use an old TWA bag for my film holders, and that red strap over Ginger's right shoulder is that bag; and the blue strap is my camera bag, with extra lenses. It takes a lot of understanding on her part; to participate in a trip like that. So, in fact, it doesn't affect my shooting, except that it expanded my subject matter, because I began to photograph her.

AS: The essay for The Complete Works *describes these pictures in terms of that classic, American, "young man alone in the world, trying to find himself, and his place", and so on--that kind of Kerouac, "On the Road" cliché. And the reason I ask about your wife is that it seems like once you found someone—well, I'm wondering if that's when you felt like the project was winding down, when you began to settle down. Basically, I'm wondering what brought you to an end.*

SS: That's a very good question. There was a settling down—I mean my life changed, and I was no longer a boy alone. I now had someone with whom I wanted to live. And I also think something else happened at the same time. As I was working, there would always be this issue that I felt I had to deal with—to solve, visually. And in answering this question, other questions would arise. This process went on almost of its own accord. I mean, I didn't just sit around thinking, "What problem am I going to deal with next?" It would just bubble up. And that went on from '73, when I started using the 4x5, until about 1981. Then it just stopped, and no more questions arose, so it seemed like that was the end of the project. At first, that situation confused me; I didn't know what that meant. I didn't understand why this would stop happening, and I wondered if I had "lost it". It took me a long time—I mean years—to realize what had happened. It feels stupid to say, but my "innate modesty" prevented me from even recognizing it—that I didn't have any more questions of that kind. That I'd answered them, and now it was time for a different phase in my work.

AS: Did you find that you started to repeat yourself? Or did you not like what you were shooting? Because, I mean, you kept on shooting. It's not like you put down the camera for two years and thought, "What should I do next?"

SS: Right. I started to become more interested in landscape. My interests changed in that I developed a particular passion for fly-fishing for trout, which took me to Montana, where Ginger and I lived for the first couple of years after we were married. And, at first I didn't do landscapes there, because I realized that, as a guy growing up in New York, all my landscape photographs in Montana could possibly say was, "Gosh, isn't this pretty!" They wouldn't have any sense of perception in the way I could bring perception to a photograph of a residential street in town.

AS: The last photograph in The Complete Works *is of Bozeman, Montana. Is this your street, where you moved to, and where you ended this series for good?*

SS: No. But, it is the town I ended in. I was fascinated by a couple of things about the landscape. I simply loved being out in the land. That's reasonable. But then I thought, "Well, I grew up in New York, and I'm supposed to be a sophisticated artist, and we're not supposed to be just doing natural landscape." Then I thought, "Why not? What's this prohibition against the natural landscape?", especially when I found myself attracted to it. After two years there, I felt that I began to see things in the land; I actually had perceptions about the land. Then I started this process of dealing with landscape, which is very tricky in color. It's hard to do a landscape in color without it looking like a calendar picture. In a way, it'd be much easier to photograph in black and white. So, that's one thing I started to work on, that continued to hold my attention throughout most of the '80s. But, in the process of doing this, I found that a lot of the things I used to think about—let's say the formal things—I just stopped thinking about. It all began to just come naturally. All the things I was considering—do I want to have this diagonal come exactly into the corner, or just be a tiny bit above the corner; do I want to have this car just jut in from the side of the frame—I just stopped thinking about. I just knew where to stand. As I said, it took me a while to accept that there was this new phase in my work. It was very confusing.

AS: The last two images in The Complete Works *are from the after '81, when the project was meant to have ended. Did you take these pictures with the project in mind?*

SS: I would say that, probably the project had pretty much ended by then. These were just pictures I continued to work on. I was taking landscapes by then but I took the picture Lee Cramer in '83, and I thought it fit in.

AS: Who was Lee Cramer?

SS: He was my wife's father.

AS: That's very interesting—you leave that out of the title. Because, the way I see Uncommon Places *is as an autobiography, but an autobiography of looking; an autobiography of seeing.*

SS: I would say that is very accurate. I don't expect someone to look at this and have any particular sense of what I did in my life. But what it is about is my explorations; my travels through looking.