

# STEPHEN SHORE

## (On Photography vs Instagram)

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

ALEXIS DAHAN – Stephen you started photography about fifty years ago when you had to know about both chemistry and physics to be a photographer. Today pretty much everybody can take a photograph with their phone. Do you think the evolution of technology has improved the nature of photography?

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, first of all, photography always had a technological aspect to it. And while its technology has changed over the past 150 years, the medium changes with it. The invention of a new camera or faster film changes what an artist can do. For example, as cameras became miniaturized in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century then a different kind of photography could be made; as high-speed films were developed, a different kind of photography could be made and so on.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Do you mean that it's in photography's nature, to evolve and change?

STEPHEN SHORE – Absolutely. When color film is developed, then again, new things could be done. Today we are going through a very dramatic period of change. We now have high-end digital cameras that are the size of a 35mm single-lens reflex but can take pictures that can rival the quality of a 4x5 view camera.

ALEXIS DAHAN – How does that affect your practice?

STEPHEN SHORE – It allows for me to take a picture that is more spontaneous but that has the resolution, the detail and the tonality of a large format camera. This picture couldn't have been made ten years ago. If I understand what the camera and the process can do, I can make different aesthetic choices.

ALEXIS DAHAN – The technological evolution influences the aesthetic decision.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes, exactly. In fact, as I'm saying this, I realize that this is very much like the structure of the educational program at Bard College where I teach. As a student learns a new technique, this allows him or her to expand their aesthetic vocabulary. And this is exactly the same as what happens to all photographers on a global level as technology develops.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Does the technological evolution replace what existed before?

STEPHEN SHORE – No. It adds to it. One of my projects for the summer is photographing my garden. I love my garden and I spend a lot of time working in it. I've been photographing it using one of the oldest techniques: a 4x5 view camera with black and white film. But at the same time, I'm also photographing it in color with my phone and posting the pictures on Instagram.

ALEXIS DAHAN – That's another aspect of the technological progress: the nature of the actual physical photograph has changed, most of the photos we look at today are on a backlit screen rather than on physical print.

STEPHEN SHORE – Which is beautiful, by the way.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Could you characterize and talk a little bit about how it affects our relationship with the photograph as an object?

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, I think there are a number of things that change with that, especially the size of the images we're looking at is different. If you look at Instagram, you'll see that the most successful Instagram pictures are visually fairly simple. Whether the photographer is conscious of it or not, they are taking photos with the understanding that the picture will be seen in a relatively small size (the size of an image on a phone or on an iPad). If the same picture was taken with film and considered too dull or too flat, on a backlit screen it will have a wonderful luminosity to it.

ALEXIS DAHAN – It is very forgiving in some ways.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yep.

ALEXIS DAHAN – And at the same time, it creates a movement from the image to us, the viewer, because the light is coming out of it as opposed to only be reflected by the print.

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, we've had this in photography for years with transparencies. It's not the same as seeing it on a monitor but still! I remember the first time I saw William Eggleston's work. I was at his home in Memphis in 1973 and he projected his slides on a screen, which also means having light being pushed through the medium. In a similar way, it had this incredible luminosity to it. And he used Kodachrome, the finest grain film Kodak ever made in color, the physical quality of his images was just spectacular.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Is there another technological change that interests you?

STEPHEN SHORE – The constant improvement of cameras in phones, which means that every single person in the world who owns a phone carries a camera on them at all time. I remember, say 20 years ago, seeing something and thinking, 'I wish I had my camera with me.' Well I never have to think that again, and not just me! No one ever has to think that again!

ALEXIS DAHAN – I've been following you on Instagram. I'm not saying that to a friend, but I'm saying that to Stephen Shore, someone who had a real impact on the history of photography. You are publishing daily and you are also embracing the autobiographical aspect of it. I'm very curious to hear what you think of it and how it affects your own artistic practice.

STEPHEN SHORE – What we are talking about is only a natural consequence of our earlier discussion about technological changes. We are seeing the improvement of digital cameras, their miniaturization and how it changes their dissemination and their availability.

ALEXIS DAHAN – The invention of a new space that is accessible to all.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. All these factors have changed what an artist can do, or what anyone can do with the medium. And it's something that interests me. I realized something very early in my development as an artist about some photographers I admired tremendously such as Atget or Bernd and Hilla Becher: they have spent a career pursuing one idea.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Monomaniacal artists?

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. I may not use the word monomaniacal about my friend Hilla Becher, but yes. I realized that is not me. As soon as I feel like I've mastered a problem, I want a new challenge.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Yes, your work always mutates.

STEPHEN SHORE – I am always open to technological development because it presents a new challenge. Take Instagram, what are some of the new challenges? One is, the pictures are square. Now I know how to post a rectangular picture, but square pictures look better: they're bigger on the screen. If you post a square picture, it comes out larger on the screen of the phone than if you post an oblong picture. It's as though Instagram is asking me to do a square picture, and I had not shot squares in 40 years!

ALEXIS DAHAN – Wow.

STEPHEN SHORE – So this is a challenge. The size is a challenge. A challenge makes it sound like it's a monumental hurdle.

ALEXIS DAHAN – A new variable.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. A new variable, that's better. It's an issue that has to be dealt with. And so I'm figuring out how to use the square, and I'm figuring out what kind of picture works in this small size, and often I'm pushing it and I'm seeing how complex a picture I can post, how detailed a picture will still work in such a small size.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What other challenges do you play with?

STEPHEN SHORE – I'm also playing against Instagram clichés. I will occasionally post a stupid pet picture, but I know that I'm posting a stupid pet picture with a medium where millions of pet pictures are posted every day. I will, on very rare occasions, post a selfie, knowing that I'm doing this in a context where millions of selfies are posted every day. So I'm both exploring it in isolation, but I'm also exploring it in terms of its own context. Having fun with its context.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Another important variable is the followers aspect. "Followers" is the same word used in a cult! The recipients, the followers, that are somewhat contained into the photo-making process. Instagram is like sending a postcard to whoever wants to receive it...

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes it is true but I never think about the followers. I'm not trying to satisfy their expectations.

ALEXIS DAHAN – There are a few photos of American crossroads in your feed though... maybe that is what people are expecting when they're following you.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes, or who knows what. I post many different kinds of pictures, and there are some people who like my flower pictures and who don't like my crossroads.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What are the most successful in terms of likes? Is it the throwbacks with Andy Warhol in the Factory?

STEPHEN SHORE – No. It's often the most graphic pictures. Which is actually an aspect that doesn't particularly interest me about a picture. I haven't been able to figure out commonalities. But even if I were to figure it out, it wouldn't affect how I am photographing, because that's one thing that has always been with me: I'm not photographing to please an audience, I'm photographing to please myself. There's something else I know in terms of followers, and I think the followers thing is very interesting, and the liking aspect is interesting.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What about the comments?

STEPHEN SHORE – When people use my feed to post comments for advertising purposes I take it down immediately. But if someone says something bad about one of my pictures, I always leave it up. I'm not trying to censor what people are saying. But if I read something crude about my wife, that comes down immediately.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Of course.

STEPHEN SHORE – But if someone says, 'Your pictures are shit.' I'll leave it up. I also find interesting that my wife has a wonderful feed. She loves Instagram as much as I do, and she has a fraction of the number of followers I have. However she has a much larger percentage of those followers liking what she's doing. So she might have, I don't know, ten percent or twenty percent liking a typical picture of hers, where I might have one or two percent.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Is the fact you have no problem playing with the autobiographical aspect of this medium because you always have subtly integrated you life in your work?

STEPHEN SHORE – I'm trying to stay away from the really personal autobiographical work for a couple of reasons. One is, I felt I already did that with the series *American Surfaces* in 1972. And the second reason is that when I see some of the more continually autobiographical feeds like Facebook, I find myself thinking: I don't want to know all this about my friends. I really don't want to know what my friends ate! And when I did *American Surfaces* it wasn't so people would know what I'm eating, or what television shows I'm watching, who would care?!

ALEXIS DAHAN – You were talking about America.

STEPHEN SHORE – Exactly, I was using this as a way of talking about America. But when people are telling me or the world what movie they went to yesterday, not because they're recommending it, but because they just want to tell me what they're doing, I am not interested because I like the idea of privacy.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What would be the main difference with photography's classical diffusion mediums such as the exhibition, the book or the magazine?

STEPHEN SHORE – Instagram is more just like language, like we're talking now, we're using language and we're not using it in a way a poet would use it or a novelist would use it, we're just using it to communicate.

ALEXIS DAHAN – It's casual photography.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. And so some people are making art on Instagram, and some people are using Instagram the way they would use Flickr, but there are a lot of people who are using Instagram just as a visual communication. And I find that fascinating and refreshing.

ALEXIS DAHAN – The fact we can communicate with a photograph?

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. It's a cliché to say that art is a universal language. But if it's a universal language, it may not be a universal practice. For example, music may be a universal language, but it doesn't mean I can go out and start composing music. There is a learning curve before I can start composing music or making a painting.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Yes.

STEPHEN SHORE – However the learning curve in making a photograph with an iPhone is very, very slight.

ALEXIS DAHAN – But with the smartphones, that photo taking muscle gets exercised at a very early age and you can take a skilled photograph as early as six years old!

STEPHEN SHORE – Oh, even earlier! Absolutely. There is a camera called a Cat Cam that is made in Germany. A little plastic, digital camera that you can set to take a picture every minute, so lightweight that you can put it on your cat's collar. The cat walks around all day long, and every minutes, he is taking a photograph. And they're surprisingly good! They are

not random, because they're always aimed at what the cat is looking at. But obviously they're unconscious. The cat has no awareness of that.

ALEXIS DAHAN – It would be nice to have a cat taking photos of other cats.

STEPHEN SHORE – It happens. If you go online and you search for Cat Cam pictures, you'll see it. So anyone can take a picture, even a cat.

ALEXIS DAHAN – But that doesn't mean every cat is a photographer!

STEPHEN SHORE – No. Everyone is a photographer but not everyone is a skilled photographer. Everyone is using the language. We learn to speak early on and we actually absorb grammatical rules very early in our life. But it doesn't mean everyone is skilled in using language, and it doesn't mean everyone has something interesting to say with the language.

ALEXIS DAHAN – So what is the difference between a skilled photographer and everybody with a telephone? Is it the intention? Is it the framework?

STEPHEN SHORE – I think it is a number of things. It is the intention because framework is part of the intention. But it is also the understanding of visual grammar. Let's compare it with verbal language. You can take a picture that is in focus, well-exposed, with content, a picture plane and four edges but even my cat can do this! And I mean that literally. Formally, it's a complete photograph even though it had been made without any sense of visual grammar or visual structure. On the other hand, while a photograph can be made without any sense of structure, in order to produce language you need a basic understanding of the structure of language.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Everyone can take a photograph but not everyone can make a living off photography. I believe that the ability to make a living out of anything has to do with the essence of that thing. When you started 50 years ago, making a living out of photography was a very different thing than today.

STEPHEN SHORE – It was impossible.

ALEXIS DAHAN – There was no photography market?

STEPHEN SHORE – For commercial photography yes but not for artists using the photography medium.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Today is 2015, how could you describe what's new about the capitalization of photography?

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, all of the things we have been talking about up until now are fascinating and expand the possibilities of photography, but at the same time, there is always a downside.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Go on.

STEPHEN SHORE – I see some photographers, students of mine, or other photographers, who photograph in a very intentional and thoughtful way with film, but when they pick up a digital camera, they lose all their intentionality. There is nothing about the camera that forces that, and you can use a digital camera with as much concentration and awareness and intentionality as a film camera. But, nonetheless, I see there is this downside where some people use it with less intentionality, less mental focus. So you have the positive aspect of less inhibition, and the negative aspect of less intentionality. And the market is the same, there was an innocence and a purity to the photography world 50 years ago, and it was like being a poet. No one decides to be a poet because they want to make a ton of money being a poet! And no one became a photographer because they wanted a gallery show and to become famous, because in New York, the largest city in the United States, there were two photography galleries in the mid-'60s. And being famous meant that a few hundred people on the face of the planet knew your name. You could sell your pictures for \$35. I mean, there was no money, there was no fame, and the people who did it, they did it because they were drawn to it. That has changed. There may be a loss of purity but I am also able to pursue my art in a way I couldn't before because now I can make a living at it. Ultimately, I see that as a positive thing. I think it's great that I can make a living off of my photographs.

ALEXIS DAHAN – It feels like a lot of people can.

STEPHEN SHORE – A lot of people can, and do, and there's a negative side to that. I see some people who have prevented their own work from evolving because they want to satisfy their market.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Once you enter a market, the demand becomes a variable of creation and you have to calibrate your offer accordingly.

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, you don't have to. Some people do but you don't have to. You can do stupid things like I do and spend the last year doing Instagram, for which there's no market.

ALEXIS DAHAN – But doing so you have surrendered full usage rights to Facebook.

STEPHEN SHORE – I didn't know that.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Yes! When you register, you sign a contract that inform you that you retain ownership of your images although you grant them the right to do whatever they want with them with no royalties.

STEPHEN SHORE – Oh really? I didn't know that [laughs].

ALEXIS DAHAN – Sorry!

STEPHEN SHORE – It won't stop me though.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Let's talk about commercial photography today: when a client with the intent of selling goods decides what will be the framework of your photograph. You have been accepting commercial commissions for a long time.

STEPHEN SHORE – I could say that I like doing commercial and fashion work, just because I like challenges. For example having an art director in London do a drawing of what they've conceived and then me figuring out how in the world I will manifest it is a fabulous challenge. Furthermore, I like the collaborative aspect of fashion work, where there are a lot of people who are all putting creative energy, including the model, including the stylists, the beauty, all this work into this event, and it can get very exciting and very pleasurable.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Can you tell us a little bit more about your fashion work? Sometimes it feels like you just put the model inside a photograph of yours, I'm curious to know more about your process.

STEPHEN SHORE – Well, both fashion and commercial, people don't come to me and say, do something that looks like someone else. If they hire me, they want me to do what I do. I always have a conversation with my client where I say: "don't feel embarrassed about telling me what you want". I know that I have a reputation as an artist and sometimes they are hesitant about saying their needs are. But what interests me as an artist is satisfying their needs. They're giving me the aesthetic problem and that's fun for me to solve it. I don't feel like I need to express myself in my fashion work. My sensibility simply comes across because this is how I see things.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Do you look at other fashion photography?

STEPHEN SHORE – Sure.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Do you feel like there is some advancement in the last 30, 40 years? Is it going in a better or worse direction?

STEPHEN SHORE – I haven't thought about it with those terms. I'm looking at it in terms of questions I have. For example, I know how to structure space in a picture, but how do I use the picture not to just clarify the space, but also to clarify the clothes? So I look at other fashion photography as a visual resource. Not to judge it but to see how other photographers are bringing their sensibility and understanding to what this venture is about: the perception of the clothes.

ALEXIS DAHAN – How do they solve the same problem.

STEPHEN SHORE – Different photographers in different periods are leaving their footprints so that we can follow and learn from them.

ALEXIS DAHAN – So you are in constant learning and evolution, the same way the medium is in constant evolution as well.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes. That is what's fun for me.

ALEXIS DAHAN – On the other side we have something that has been labeled "conceptual photography", and you have written about the Bechers and how you thought they were visual artists rather than conceptual photographers. Could you explain how the medium photography can be used only to carry an idea while its visual aspect becomes secondary?

STEPHEN SHORE – The Bechers were friends with Douglas Huebler, and their approaches were quite different. Huebler would work out his schemata and say: you can go to these coordinates and you face north and you take a picture. In this case, the picture is a pure product of an idea. The Bechers have an ideational framework but their work is visual. Let's take *Water Towers*, the water tower have two functions: it has to be able to hold water, and it has to be raised up high so that the pressure of the water will allow it to go into buildings and houses in the surrounding community without pumping. Other than that, how they look is all about aesthetic conventions and cultural conventions. A French water tower built in 1910 looks different than a Belgian water tower built in 1910. And that Belgian water town of 1910 looks different than that other Belgian water tower from 1940. These are all cultural conventions that are imposed on their basic function, and this is what the Bechers are fascinated by. But this is not conveyed through an idea, it is conveyed visually.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What was Huebler interested in?

STEPHEN SHORE – I'm not sure Douglas Huebler actually cares what you see when you go to his coordinate and take a picture. He's interested in the picture being the byproduct of the idea. For the Bechers, the idea is the seed and the seed

sprouts. The idea of photographing water towers in similar lights, at similar distance, is the seed, but the fruition of the plant is the visual results of the photographs.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Is this tension: framework for visual content versus visual content to embody an idea still very present in today's photography?

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes, but again, it's a language and it's used in many different ways. There are photographers who simply go out and see what they encounter during the day, and other photographers work with varying degrees of intentionality, and I don't think there's one right way of working, I think it's just what people are drawn to.

ALEXIS DAHAN – The technical evolution is always adding to the possibility of photography while but the original tensions inherent to the medium, the problems of visual concepts and frameworks, these remain the same.

STEPHEN SHORE – Yes, I believe so.

ALEXIS DAHAN – OK, thank you.

STEPHEN SHORE – Thank you, it was a wonderful conversation.