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Stephen Shore and the style of a 'New Topographics'

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For the curator William Jenkins, style was what connected the photographs he brought together for an exhibition which opened at George Eastman House late in 1975 (figure 1).[1] Memorably named, 'New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape', the show included work by a group of ten photographers, almost all young male

Figure 1 Installation view of the exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, 14 October 1975 – 2 February 1976. George Eastman House. Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum.

artists, each connected via the localised networks through which the medium was then evolving in the United States. They were Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel, Jr. The photographs, none made more than six years before, showed the nondescript spaces of North American cities and their contiguous developments. Parked cars, domestic buildings, industrial sites, and flat, stretching roads were presented matter-of-factly. As the exhibition's title implies, the work seemed to signal a new type of landscape photography, though one whose subjects were likely to have been disarmingly familiar. When one spectator was asked during an interview in the gallery to explain why he liked the photographs, he began to answer by saying 'because I've been there'.[2] It was that kind of recognitive reaction that Jenkins attributed not merely to the work's subjects, but to a certain 'viewpoint' adopted by the photographers.[3] And through it, he hoped to interrogate ideas about the veracity of the photographic image. Rounding off his introduction to the show's slim catalogue, Jenkins explained that 'if "New Topographics" has a central purpose it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph'.

Notwithstanding the resolution of his statement, Jenkins would have known that 'simply' was doing a lot of work. The pictures he had chosen might each have shown landscapes 'altered' by human-made structures, but collectively they resisted the idea that documentary photography could be *simply* defined. Lewis Baltz showed the dark, abstracted, flattened depictions of low-lying warehouses from his series, *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974). Seen next to Shore's Kodacolor pictures of painted wooden-clad houses and city intersections, or even the Bechers' typological grids of intricate, skeletal Pennsylvanian Pit Heads, Baltz's would have seemed foreboding visions of an unknowable future. Further along the row of identically framed prints, the way Henry Wessel photographed his own shadow, or the camera's flash bouncing off a glass door, figured a self-awareness that was absent from Nicholas Nixon's 'views', as he called them, from elevated positions over Boston and Cambridge, MA. Noticing that each photographer appeared in this way to be making their own claim on the documentary, one contemporary reviewer was unequivocal, matching Jenkins's proposition with another: 'the pictures simply do not bear out this contention of unity'.[4]

And yet, Jenkins insisted the work reflected a shared 'picture-making attitude'. It was in their stylistic context that the photographs cohered, he was sure, for each was engaged in a similar way with 'the problem [. . .] of style'. That last word he used to describe something like the trace in the work of its author, whose intrusion the exhibiting photographers had endeavoured to subdue. In language that recalls foundational debates about the medium's objectivity, Jenkins suggested they had successfully cultivated a shared viewpoint which was 'anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic'. Though he wrestles with the idea that a document must, to 'maintain veracity', necessarily negate style or be *style-less*, this is ultimately dismissed in favour of something less absolute. Rather, what the 'New Topographics' photographers had done was approximate the plainly descriptive style of topographic study. That was what made the work documentary, Jenkins felt; the way its 'physical subject matter and conceptual or referential subject matter' had been made to coincide. Therein lay 'the central factor in the making of a document'. It was on these terms that 'New Topographics' could be defined against the legacy of Ed Ruscha, who, though identified as the exhibition's intellectual forerunner, was felt to have driven a wedge between subject and concept in projects like *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) and *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965). Unlike Ruscha's books, the *New Topographics* pictures were *about* what they were of, Jenkins surmised.

Accordingly, *topography* suggested itself for how it could describe that coincidence of photographic subject and meaning. Jenkins offered a definition taken from *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*: 'the detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish or tract of land'. On one level, the term captured something of photography's indexicality, or 'what it does first and best'. However, as Jenkins quickly acceded, photography did other things too. And just as with that medium so did the medium of place or *topos* resist being singly defined.[5] Topography, that is, can apply both to the representation of a region or landscape *and* to the physical features themselves. He went on: 'the word *topography* is in general use today in connection with the making of maps or with land as described by maps and it does not unduly stretch the imagination to see all photographs as maps of a sort'. All photographs, then, might have been a little bit map-like, but only landscape photographs – and only some

landscape photographs, to be sure – were truly topographic because of the way the word's double meaning played out in them. Hardwired into those pictures was both the land as described by maps, and a self-evident concern with the means of the maps' making. In other words, these were landscape photographs, but also landscape photographs that looked a certain way.

I want to suggest that we call this way of looking a topographical style. Although Jenkins did not use the expression in his own writings about 'New Topographics', it is a useful way of identifying how, and where, he located the photographs' critical relation to their subject. And the need to do so now presses. Jenkins's enigmatic curatorial thesis has helped to historicise 'New Topographics' as a kind of formalist paean to John Szarkowski, the long-time Director of the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art. It was with Szarkowski in mind that the exhibition's most outspoken critic took her position. 'New Topographics', the argument went, worked according to the modernist premise that 'one does not make photographs *of* things or events, but rather makes pictures to see forms in flat arrangements with their own internal coherence'.[6] That assessment might seem quite appropriate given the exhibition's ambivalent gesturing towards neutrality and detachment. However, I think it fails to account for exactly how Jenkins loaded his ideas about documentary photography onto the concept of style.

By so framing the work on display, Jenkins was fitting it into an ongoing critical debate. Style, as was then being argued, could no longer be isolated from subject, but was as much about *what* is said, as about *how*.[7] So, a topographical style represented the landscape in such a way that the viewer would become aware of its limits. One could say that it transcended simple aestheticism to identify the rhetorical function of the photographs, and in that to locate a documentary potentiality. I am thinking here of Allan Sekula, who, writing just a few months before 'New Topographics' opened, had argued that photography operates rhetorically and always in relation to what he called its discourse situations.[8] Somewhat paradoxically, it was usually the role of the photographic discourse to deny any rhetorical function and to assert instead a photograph's inherent impartiality. What I think style offered Jenkins was an opportunity to define the document as a discursive construction, one that worked in this way to smother rhetoric.[9] Readers of the catalogue were encouraged to see 'New Topographics' as a 'stylistic event'; in Sekula's terms, perhaps this was to say, a rhetorical performance

constituting a discourse situation. I propose we understand style within this framework, with the institutional setting as the photographs' 'text', each picture a message bounded by the connotative theatre of exhibition.

Noticing a change in the photographs Shore had begun making shortly before his involvement in 'New Topographics', one critic described how 'the clutter of urban life now seems to align itself purposefully, almost dutifully, in front of his lens'.[10] That alignment was the resolution of a topographical style. For if Shore's photographs stood out, it was not only because they were in colour but also because of their extraordinary preoccupation with, even narrativization of, form. In each, the human-altered landscape is structural and conceptual. As we will see, nowhere is this more apparent than in the photographs of intersections, where the same pattern that regulates the landscape also controls the picture plane. But it is not only with these works. What I mean to propose is that the style of Shore's photographs most legibly rendered Jenkins's ideas about the documentary.

The change in Shore's practice gestured to above presents a point of departure. In the spring of 1973, he put down his 35mm Rollei and began photographing with large-format view cameras: first 4-by-5s, then 8-by-10s.[11] At first, he meant to continue to take the kind of responsive, reactive pictures that comprised a recently completed series, *American Surfaces* (1972–1973). Keeping the view camera mounted on its tripod next to him on the passenger seat was supposed to save time setting the whole thing up.[12] But the technological changes forced evolutions in the work. In place of the Rollei's viewfinder was now a gridded ground glass, which Shore would have to peer at from underneath a hood. There, the image appeared inverted (upside-down and back-to-front), an inconvenience for which the grid offered a compensatory structural regimen. The view cameras required slower exposure times, could not equal the Rollei's flash, and yet afforded exquisite, maximal detail. Without the constrictive instructions used for previous projects, and because the large-format cameras were so heavy, the film so expensive, the new photographs depended more than ever upon careful and deliberate observation.

Uncommon Places was how Shore titled the work from these years when he compiled it as a book in 1982. The phrase plays with how photography can transform the quotidian, but it also points to a turn in the pictures towards the spatial. Although Shore had continued to take portraits and the occasional

still life, in the larger work landscapes emerged as a prominent motif. The size and focal range of the view camera made interior shots more awkward, while setting the machine farther back from the subject did not mean sacrificing detail in the finished prints. The photographs Shore could take with the Arca Swiss 8-by-10 contained so much visual information that each appeared to him as 'this little world, this little bound world'.[13]

Shore was not the only photographer in the group to have scaled up. The Bechers had long before settled on the view camera for their typologies, but John Schott and Nicholas Nixon too began using 8-by-10s in the early 1970s.[14] One commentator has pointed out that 'New Topographics' came amid a waning of the dominance of the 35mm camera: as the philosophy of photography advanced, the medium was folding back on itself to bridge a century of technologisation.[15] But the view camera's outmoded technology signified more than an exercise in formal experimentation. The equipment that Shore, Schott and Nixon took up and trained on the built environment also historicised the photographs, connecting them to a tradition beginning somewhere among the landscape surveys made a century before (figure 2). An anachronistic disjunction in the camera's precise rendering of modern, mundane landscapes – Shore's motel pool, for instance, in *Hob Nob Motel, Florida, Massachusetts, July 14, 1974* (1975) – was ambiguously political but also ironic and humorous. It was through these effects that the view camera provided for a kind of critical reflexivity, something Jeff Wall has convincingly argued was central to conceptual art's transformation of photography in the 1960s and 1970s.[16]

Shore, Schott, Nixon, and the Bechers were, in other words, displacing inherited ideas about art photography's purpose. As Wall phrased it, they were putting into play the medium's own necessary condition of being 'a depiction-which-constitutes-an-object'.[17] Noticing Shore's adherence to a theme, another commentator later claimed it was 'interesting that many photographers extended their creative lives by moving from 35mm shutter photography, rapid, hunter photography, to the slower stalking of the 4-by-5 and 8-by-10'.[18] Shore, who fashioned himself in these early days as a kind of *reconnoiterer*, was in this sense 'exploring photography as much as exploring America'.[19] Such a doubled enquiry necessarily invoked the survey archive, itself a body of work in which style was tasked with rhetorical significance. The historian Robin Kelsey has suggested that the nineteenth-century

Figure 2 Timothy O'Sullivan, *Camp Ruby, Ruby, Nevada*, 1868. Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum.

photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan and others traded in a stylistic currency, one neither entirely metonymic nor metaphoric, but rather resembling something like the 'metaphor of metonymy'.[20] I am suggesting that by similarly working the aesthetic of indexicality, Shore gave new meaning to the material implications of being a document which was about what it was of.

One cannot help but notice that the change of cameras nearly emptied his landscape pictures of the human figure. Doubtless this was because longer exposure times made it more difficult to render movement without blurring the image. In the work Shore made that centred people in the years 1973–1982, the figures are often still or posed, observant, watching. But the emptying out also signalled a shift in Shore's treatment of the landscape. Now, in the photographs of intersections, cityscapes, and roads, long- and medium-shots deepened pictorial space. Sometimes this meant returning to the same places he had photographed for *American Surfaces* and re-shooting

them with the larger camera, ironing out the kinks. Always, distance eats up the ground, making space 'more social, less intimate', in the words of one critic, such that '[p]eople don't dominate the scene, but fit into it'.[21] Alberto Toscano has identified de-peopling as a theme in the work of the 'New Topographics' photographers and their epigones, asking why photographs of human-altered landscapes are so often simultaneously 'human-absent landscapes'.[22] Indeed, Shore was the only artist in Jenkins's exhibition to picture people at an identifiable scale. But by absenting the figure in this way, or making it 'fit in', the photographs prompt us to examine the weight of that absence, its physical converse. We come instead to see the humans *in* the infrastructure.

Of Shore's new 8-by-10 pictures, Jenkins chose twenty for the exhibition, nineteen in landscape and one, of a house's façade, in portrait, and all taken between June 1974 and February 1975. Alongside Shore, each of the remaining photographers was also represented by twenty works, apart from the Bechers who showed seven, and Henry Wessel who appears perhaps accidentally to have shown twenty-one. There is a commonly held assumption that 'New Topographics' told a story about the American West, probably because so much of the exhibition's critical reception has focused on the contribution of Robert Adams – Shore's pictures alone give the lie to it, capturing as they did the architectures and infrastructures of locations in Arkansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Saskatchewan, Texas, and Washington.[23]

Among the first photographs Shore took with the Arca Swiss was *West Avenue, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, July 12, 1974* (1974) (figure 3). It shows a boxy house built in the Dutch Colonial Revival style, clad in white and with a multi-tone tiled roof. Amid wide, unblemished lawns, an empty driveway cuts in from the left, and a series of shaped hedges acts almost like a fig leaf to conceal the seam where the building meets the ground. The flat darkness of the windows suggests no one is home, though their symmetry and parted curtains seem comically to lend the structure the anthropomorphic features of a human face. Obdurately frontal, the image could be excerpted from one of the architectural typologies which the German photographers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, had been making since 1959. The critic and historian Michael Fried has considered how the Bechers' typologies pose structures as portraits, and I think there is a suggestion of that play of face and façade in *West*

Figure 3 Stephen Shore, *West Avenue, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, July 12, 1974*, 1974. © Stephen Shore. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Sprüth Magers.

Avenue.[24] Shore's New England house is even quite uncannily echoed in one such work by the German duo that was made the same year and which was included, along with *West Avenue*, in Jenkins's exhibition.

House near Kutztown, Pennsylvania, USA (1974) (figure 4) is a typology of eight identically sized prints, displayed in two equal columns. The photograph at the top left shows a frontal elevation of the titular building. Like Shore's picture, the Bechers' centres the house, doubling and condensing in its outline the parameters of the photographic frame. The Pennsylvanian structure is larger but exhibits the same mathematical rigidity; perhaps it is even more perfectly sutured to the lines of a grid. And the typology's skeleton repeats the pattern, deploying it to render the house in the round from eight evenly positioned angles. In that measured repetition, critics have found a certain formalism preoccupied with objectivity and self-containment.

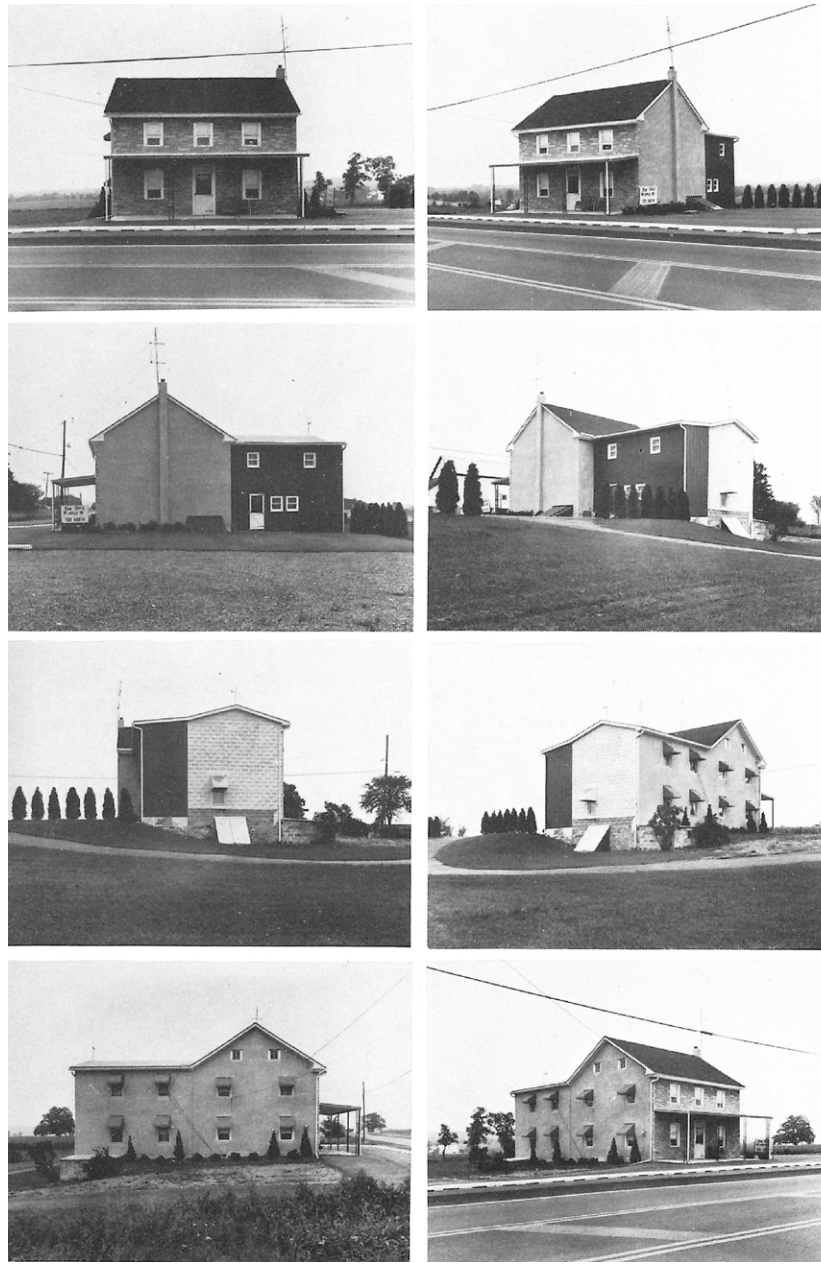

Figure 4 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *House near Kutztown, Pennsylvania, USA*, 1974.
© Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

Such a view is no doubt indebted to Rosalind Krauss's theorisation, in 1979, of the grid as modernism's form *par excellence*.[25] But if Fried could see the Bechers' architectural photographs as portraits of a kind, what of their subjective register? The art historian Heather Diack has suggested the grid operates differently when mobilised by photography: rather than foreclose opportunities for subjective readings, it becomes a format capable of challenging the pretended objectivity of institutional rhetoric.Systematised and multiplied, the 'trace of the face' in *House near Kutztown* is, paradoxically, given a 'vital, breathing presence'.[26] The objectifying logic of the grid is rendered illusory *in the face*, so to speak, of the emergent subject.

Shore had explored the serial consequences of these ideas in *American Surfaces*.[27] However, when that project ended, those concerns were not closed out or completed but I think transfigured with the evolutions in his practice. In the work made with the large-format cameras after 1973, Shore continued to grapple with questions prompted by the subjective experience of landscape. Only now, the investigation played out within the space created by the picture frame. With the change of equipment, the infrastructural grid had been internalised as the photographs' compositional apparatus. The pattern's homogenising impulse, its material histories, the agency of a citizenry: here was what would animate an investigation into the communicative capacities of pictorial form. Ironically, it was once *American Surfaces* was finished that the surface of the photograph became charged with new meaning. As the index of the photographer's relation to the landscape, it was inscribed in each instance with all the peculiarity of its own little bound world.

Reflecting on the prevalence of architectural pictures in his work from the 1970s, Shore has spoken of wanting to communicate the 'cultural forces' of place.[28] It was an interest he got from studying Walker Evans. Not in themselves photographable, these 'aesthetic, cultural, economic forces' are made visible, he claims, in the material culture of the built environment.[29] To photograph human-absent landscapes, as Toscano called them, was not therefore to deny but to engage infrastructure's social register. Picking up on this theme in Shore's oeuvre, the critic Jack Self notes that the built environment is unusual for how it exists in a 'state in which the social projection of meaning onto objects is inseparable from the physical relations of those objects'. Putting it another way, this was something like a simultaneous 'condition of being real and representation'.[30] It is using this

double resonance that Shore models a topographical style. His photographs examine landscape as the site(s) where physicality is made social, where real and representation jostle before the camera. The significance (as in *signifying*) of the built environment could thus animate an investigation into the kinds of work that a documentary photography might be made to do.

By 1975, the Bechers had similarly made human absence central to their project of photographing domestic and industrial structures such as houses, water towers and grain elevators. *House near Kutztown* is one work in a systematically chronicled body of thousands of pictures, the thrust of which wanted to reject the subjectivist turn that marked photography in the early post-war period.[31] Still, we have seen how a subjectivity could creep back in. The critic Blake Stimson, anticipating Diack's claims, noted the subjective register of the Bechers' *comportment*. Stimson used that term to cast the visual grammar unifying their oeuvre as 'an embodied relationship to the world', or, elsewhere, 'as a sign or condition or component part of a social form'.[32]

I think comportment is a useful idea to bring to bear on Shore's practice; indeed, I have already touched on some of the ways Shore's and the Bechers' projects aligned.[33] Although an important difference remains. Namely, Stimson sees that social relation explicated in the Bechers' photographs through the sequencing of a schema, for example in the gridded organisation of *House near Kutztown*, or more generally in the 'epic continuity' of their work and its legacies.[34] Whereas in Shore's large-format work, I think the sociality comes more unitarily. That is, by being almost emptied of human subjects, the work emphasises instead the embodied relationship of photographer to world through which each individuated photograph was produced.

Because, finally, the change of cameras also initiated a move away from the conceptualist notion of seriality that Shore had previously valued. Although these photographs would later be published in serial form as *Uncommon Places*, the book's truncated selection presented just forty-nine pictures from the several thousand he had taken over nearly a decade. In the new large-format photographs, the eye was prompted less to move from one image to the next and the next, but was encouraged instead to linger, to move over and through each of them, luxuriating in their dense visuality. '[O]ne actually enters into the object', is how Hilla Becher claimed to experience Shore's pictures, adding, 'one genuinely finds a form in which is it possible to do this'.[35] It was therefore in the grid, I think, *as pictorial structure* and subject

both, or, in the shapes and forms of the built environment, that a social relation was proposed. Isolated temporally by the view camera, landscapes became rich, palimpsestic sites that could both map and be mapped.

If Shore's photographs get closest to realising style's documentary potential as Jenkins imagined it, where this happens most obviously is in the pictures of intersections. Half of the photographs Shore submitted to the exhibition showed those infrastructural nodes, places he called 'visual laboratories' for the formal tests they made so richly rewarding.[36] Dense amalgams of hard lines and patterned planes required resolving, and foregrounded style as the problem Jenkins claimed it to be. The precision of Shore's configurations must have been at the front of the curator's mind when he wrote about the exhibition's 'scientific' viewpoint. But it was always about more than just form. In the intersections, unambiguously, the infrastructural grid was simultaneously subject and structure. They are therefore a neat illustration of Jenkins's topographical concept, his argument that a style which aligned the two might gloss a picture as a document.

The 'visual laboratories' comment seems also to acknowledge that photographs of these interstitial spaces contained something akin to evidence. In the 1970s, a burgeoning discipline of cultural landscape studies was still extending geography's ekphrastic parameters to include the human-altered spaces historically ignored. One prominent geographer worried this was happening too late. 'It is impossible to avoid the conclusion', he wrote, 'that we have perversely overlooked a huge body of evidence which – if appreciated carefully and studied without aesthetic or moral prejudice – can tell us a great deal about what kinds of people Americans are, were, and may become'.[37]

Shore offered up the intersection as a place where forgotten stories about the nation might reside. How better to learn about what kinds of people Americans are, were, and may become than from these sites, where the metaphorical directionalities of past and future meet and merge with the present? Shore's picture, *2nd Street East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana, August 22, 1974* captures the moment a dark bank of cloud split the sky above the street corner (figure 5). The photograph echoes John Gast's famous painting of the frontier, *American Progress* (1872), but Shore confounds its determined advancement. In Kalispell, the sun neither banishes nor succumbs to the clouds, meanwhile a red stoplight lasers out from the middle point, punctuating a statement of

Figure 5 Stephen Shore, *2nd Street East and South Main Street, Kalispell, Montana, August 22, 1974*, 1974. © Stephen Shore. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Sprüth Magers.

arrested movement. One critic has noted the 'temporal hybridity' of Shore's work from this period, arguing that it is produced not by romantic visions of ruined pasts, but his depiction of 'contingency and possibility'.[38] By carefully rendering the complex interrelationships between people and their altered environments, Shore's pictures look backwards as well as forwards along narrative lines of unresolved multiplicity.

Hilla Becher was again the person to describe the implications of Shore's photographic choices. When asked what she found special about these pictures, Becher said matter-of-factly, 'the intersection is what America is. You could almost say that outside Manhattan life intensifies precisely at the intersections'.[39] In each was a New York City in microcosm, and so in each was also the democratic project. Becher's comment figures intersections as meeting places underwritten by a history of nation-building. Colonisation

and revolution, immigration and oppression: the whole story was nascent in their geometrical artifice. Shore remembers a conversation the two artists had in which Becher recommended a strategy of her own practice. 'She suggested that I just photograph main streets across America', he recalls. 'My reaction was that it wasn't right for me. Thinking about her suggestion made me realize that what I was after was not a study of main streets (or gas stations, suburban houses, shopping centers, etc.), but the quintessential main street'.[40] Intersections and main streets. What connected them was not only asphalt but the *medium* of landscape. Rejecting typologies for individual visions focused on the fiction, it pointed to the ideological forces through which the cultural symbols were produced. This was a means, as W. J. T. Mitchell has advocated, of figuring landscape not only 'as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed'.[41] In that way, intersections were also what America is, and it was that duality that a topographical style wrestled to the document's surface.

Writing some years later about the work he was making on the eve of the exhibition, Shore described taking pictures that were becoming more and more structurally complex. He reflected on what was then a developing interest in the role of the photograph as a frame, and how it 'forms a line that all of the visual elements of the picture relate to'.[42] Alluding perhaps to the theatricality of the photographic act as well as to the artifice of the drama it rendered, Shore offered that the frame was something like the image's proscenium. The photograph he had in mind was *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975* (1975) (figure 6). Characteristically named with the bare features of its doubled provenance/subject, *Beverly and La Brea* was not one that Jenkins included in 'New Topographics'. Probably it was taken just a few months too late.[43] And yet the picture comes as a kind of coda to the body of work represented by Shore's contribution to the exhibition. Soon after taking it, Shore intuited that *Beverly and La Brea* stood for all the ways he was imposing an order on what was in front of the lens. He saw in the picture 'the culmination of this process of juggling ever-increasing visual complexity'.[44] What Shore recognised, it seems to me, was that quality of his photographs that Jenkins described as their style: a rigorous structuring that took its shape from the components of the human-altered landscape.

Figure 6 Stephen Shore, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*, 1975. © Stephen Shore. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Sprüth Magers.

Awake suddenly to how artistic mediation had been formalised in his work of the last year or more, Shore returned the next day to the same intersection and took another photograph. This one, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 22, 1975* (1975) (figure 7), had nothing of the first's precise planarity. Swivelling in the place on the pavement where he had taken the first, Shore now looked north-west at the corner of the two streets. Whereas every line had arranged that initial picture in correspondence with the grid of the view camera's ground glass, in the following day's photograph, the bent necks of the lampposts crane left and right in a knotty phalanx of metal. The setting sun erases the picture's top-left corner, such that the arcing telephone wires join their masts to the vacuity of a total abstraction. It was a formal solution that appeared more like 'an outgrowth of the scene in front of me', Shore felt, a solution which attempted to unthink form in the hope that making it

Figure 7 Stephen Shore, *Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 22, 1975*, 1975. © Stephen Shore. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Sprüth Magers.

invisible or transparent might better communicate the artist's experience of standing there.[45]

Really, though, Shore was not now removing structure from the equation, only choosing a different one. And he conceded as much when he later wrote that form 'is not art sauce poured on top of content' but is there from the beginning, inextricably entwined.[46] The critic Svetlana Alpers has pointed to the interrelationship of form and subject in a photograph by Walker Evans that is strikingly like the first of Shore's *Beverly Boulevard* pictures. Evans favoured the straight-on treatment, too. Alpers claims *Commercial Quarter, South 3rd St., Paducah, Kentucky* (1947) shows how 'Evans's level, centred, straight-on photographic view' often produces pictorial forms that echo or replicate his subjects. The lines of mid-century American vernacular architectures were precise and right-angled, and so, simply put, his 'photographic style

matched the aesthetic style of his world'.[47] Like Evans, Shore developed in large-format a formal perspective which was rooted in the patterns of the landscape. His dissatisfaction with the order of *Beverly Boulevard [. . .] June 21* was in some ways the discharging of an Evansian debt, accrued with the gifted copy of *American Photographs* he had received as a boy.

The rupture is significant. In the gap between the two *Beverly and La Brea* pictures, one sees how the work leading up to that point organised itself in such a way that sets it apart. Shore's methodology, becoming as it was ever more tangible, re-doubled structure as his subject. It was a stylistic manoeuvre that allowed him to document the human-altered landscape at the same time as photography's rhetorical functions. The way Jenkins put it, the photographs were of and about the same thing. Understood this way, Shore's work can be made to answer the exhibition's criticisms. For here was what was felt to have been left out: representations of landscapes whose construction by culture is made explicit – is made, even, into the very subject of photographic investigation.[48]

If stylistic decisions revealed the ways landscape is constructed as a representational technology, they also materialised what Jenkins called the 'extremely fragile' relationship between a subject and its photograph. Which was to say that documentary photography does not emerge from the curtailment of authorial presence in the direction of some mechanical essence. Rather, the exhibition proposed that a document is produced by the extension of that same presence through affect. By openly questioning photography's claim to truth, Jenkins accepted – I quote Sekula again – that 'the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context determined'.[49] Documentary, in other words, could be no more than one of the various representational tasks that the discourse directs photographs to undertake. In the middle of the 1970s, the fidelity of the medium was at stake.[50] And it was style, Jenkins suggested, that could be marshalled to salvage it. Though he may have believed that the artists strove to withhold judgement and opinion from their images, he cast doubt on whether the work could more than appear to do so. Jenkins knew, I think, that the viewer was to be duped by rhetorical flourish. Topography, or *topographics*, was simply the concept through which that trick might be made possible.

Notes

1 Known today as the George Eastman Museum, the institution has had various names since its founding in 1947. At the time of 'New Topographics', it referred to itself as the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. I have opted for the short form, 'George Eastman House', for consistency.

2 'Prologue,' in *New Topographics*, ed. Britt Salvesen (Göttingen: Steidl/Center for Creative Photography, 2009), 8–9, 9.

3 William Jenkins, 'Introduction,' in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5–7, 7. All subsequent quotations attributed to Jenkins are drawn from these pages.

4 Charles Desmarais, 'Topographical error,' *Afterimage,* vol. 3, no. 5 (1975), 10–11, 11.

5 Jenkins cites the immediate predecessor to 'New Topographics' in George Eastman House's series of exhibitions on contemporary photography, a show called *The Extended Document: An Investigation of Information and Evidence in Photographs*. Also curated by Jenkins, it combined work by John Baldessari, Thomas Barrow, Marcia Resnick, and others, to explore the idea that 'the photograph is at the mercy of the photographer and that objective photography ceased to exist the moment we questioned it'. That moment was identified as the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans*, first in France in 1958 and then a year later in the United States. Ever since, Jenkins claimed, we as viewers were required to contend with the notion that 'photographs can lie and that they can and often do contain meanings quite apart from their visual subject matter'. See William Jenkins, *The Extended Document: An Investigation of Information and Evidence in Photographs* (Rochester: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975).

6 Deborah Bright, 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography,' *Exposure* 23, no. 1 (1985), 5–18, 11. Bright's essay, which interrogated what Bright saw as a 'resurgence' in landscape photography, has become quite firmly lodged in the critical memory. Originally published in *Exposure* magazine, it reached a wide audience after it was included, revised, in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (London: MIT Press, 1989), 125–143.

7 The philosopher Nelson Goodman made this argument in an article he wrote for the *Critical Inquiry* earlier in 1975. Jenkins took his own introduction's epigraph from the same issue of the *Critical Inquiry* in which the Goodman piece appeared. See Nelson Goodman, 'The Status of Style', *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (1975), 799–811.

8 Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,' *Artforum*, 13, no. 5 (1975), 37–45, 37. Three years on, Sekula would add his voice to Bright's but specifically as a critique of Lewis Baltz's *Industrial Parks* series: 'Photography like that of Lewis Baltz [. . .] suggests that the oxymoronic label, "industrial park" is somehow natural, an unquestionable aspect of a landscape that is both a source of Pop disdain and mortuarial elegance of design. Baltz's photographs of enigmatic factories fail to tell us anything about them'. It is this critique that I am suggesting Shore's work helps to undo. See Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),' *The Massachusetts Review*, 19, no. 4 (1978), 859–883, 870.

9 Although Jenkins invoked neutrality, it was only as 'the appearance of neutrality'. An opaque admission, perhaps, that the idea was 'bogus' like Sekula claimed. See Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism,' 60.
10 Christy Lange, 'Survey: Nothing Overlooked,' in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon, 2007), 39–111, 73.
11 For a comprehensive timeline of Shore's camera use, based on what Shore recorded in his journals, see Kristen Gaylord, 'A Photographic Chronology,' in *Stephen Shore*, ed. Quentin Bajac (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 286–300.
12 Lange, 79.
13 Stephen Shore quoted in 'Stephen Shore in a Conversation with Lynne Tillman,' in *Stephen Shore: Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 173–183, 181.
14 The other photographers used a range of smaller and medium format cameras: Adams, 6x7cm; Baltz, 35mm; Deal, 6x6cm (2 ¼ inch); Gohlke, 6x6cm (2 ¼ inch); Wessel, 35mm. See 'Checklist of the 1975 Exhibition,' in *New Topographics* (2009), 262–289.
15 Britt Salvesen, 'New Topographics,' in *New Topographics*, ed. Britt Salvesen (Göttingen: Steidl/Center for Creative Photography, 2009), 10–67, 30.
16 See Jeff Wall, '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,' in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975*, eds. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 247–267.
17 Ibid, 248.
18 David Campany quoted in 'Ways of Making Pictures: Interview by David Campany,' in *Stephen Shore: Survey* (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre/Aperture, 2014), 23–55 (51).
19 Ibid, 52. Shore has described how 'In the '70s, I wanted to explore American culture. I would even dress the part of an explorer with a jumpsuit, like an astronaut. One year I dressed at Abercrombie & Fitch [originally an outdoor and sporting goods store]. It was my country, but I was an explorer in it.' See ibid.
20 Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 17.
21 'Stephen Shore in a Conversation with Lynne Tillman,' 181.
22 Alberto Toscano, 'The World Is Already without Us,' *Social Text*, 34, no. 2 (2016), 109–124, 112.
23 Deborah Bright called Adams 'the most complex and articulate of the New Topographers'. See Bright, 15.
24 Michael Fried, 'Barthes's Punctum,' *Critical Inquiry*, 31, no. 3 (2005), 539–574, 569. Cited in Heather Diack, *Documents of Doubt: The Photographic Conditions of Conceptual Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 148.
25 See Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids,' *October*, 9 (1979), 50–64.
26 Diack, 148–155.
27 See my essay, 'Landscape as grid in Stephen Shore's "American surfaces",' *Burlington Magazine*, 165, no. 1442 (2023), 522–529.
28 Stephen Shore quoted in 'Pictures of the Present: Stephen Shore in conversation with Jack Self,' *Real Review* 10 (2020), 46–54, 49.
29 Ibid, 49.
30 Ibid, 49.

31 Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (London: The MIT Press: 2006), 137.
32 Ibid, 143, 167.
33 Hilla Becher was introduced to Shore by the curator, Weston Naef, in 1973, and would go on to become a close friend. Students of the Bechers – sometimes referred to collectively by the portmanteau, 'Struffsky' – include Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, and Andreas Gursky, and are well known to cite Shore as an influence. See Stimson, 143 (footnote 12).
34 Ibid, 143.
35 Hilla Becher quoted in '"His pictures have the quality of a first encounter": Hilla and Bernd Becher in Conversation with Heinz Liesbrock,' in *Stephen Shore: Photographs 1973–1993*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock (London: Schirmer/Mosel, 1995), 27–33, 27.
36 Stephen Shore, *Modern Instances: The Craft of Photography* (London: MACK, 2022), 61.
37 Peirce F. Lewis, 'Axioms of the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,' *Journal of Architectural Education*, 30, no. 1 (1976): 6–9; repr. in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11–32, 19.
38 Finis Dunaway, 'Beyond Wilderness: Robert Adams, *New Topographics*, and the Aesthetics of Ecological Citizenship,' in *Reframing the New Topographics*, eds. Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 13–44, 33–34.
39 Becher quoted in '"His pictures have the quality of a first encounter",' 30.
40 Salvesen, p. 35. Even so, Shore photographed a great many intersections during the 1970s. So many, in fact, that he later felt *Uncommon Places* might have better encapsulated his large-format work from the decade had it been dedicated to them exclusively. See Campany, 34–35.
41 W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Introduction,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–4, 1.
42 Stephen Shore, 'Form and Pressure,' *Aperture*, 205, no. 44 (2011), 44–49; reprinted and revised in Shore, *Modern Instances*, 19–27.
43 Of the twenty photographs by Shore which Jenkins included in *New Topographics*, eighteen were taken in 1974, two in February 1975. See 'Checklist,' in *New Topographics* (1975), 45–48, 47–48; reprinted in *New Topographics* (2009), 262–288.
44 Shore, 'Form and Pressure,' 45.
45 Ibid, 48.
46 Ibid, 48.
47 Svetlana Alpers, *Walker Evans: Starting from Scratch* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 10–11.
48 Bright, 9.
49 Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,' 37.
50 See Jenkins, *The Extended Document*, 1.