

Photographic Grammar

A review of The Nature of Photographs

by Peter Brown

Originally published in SPOT, Spring 2007

Book Info:

The Nature of Photographs

A Primer

Stephen Shore

Phaidon Press Limited, New York, 2007

136 pages, \$35

The photographer Stephen Shore (Uncommon Places, American Spaces, The Gardens at Giverny) has written an unexpected and interesting book which he subtitled a *primer*. It's a photographic grammar of sorts and was published initially in the mid-nineties, by Johns Hopkins Press. This last May it was reissued in an expanded and updated edition by Phaidon.

The book itself is subtle, beautiful and useful. The Nature of Photographs is relatively small; its cover is understated; its typewriter-like font unassuming and its pages are filled with a gallery of astonishingly well reproduced photographs. These pictures both illustrate and in some ways run in counterpoint to Shore's analytic text. The book is designed with a good deal of white space - and the images (which run from anonymous pictures, to Watkins, to Stieglitz, to Struth) breathe easily - both stand-ins for ideas, and resonant in their own right.

The idea for The Nature of Photographs apparently was inspired by John Szarkowski's 1966 book The Photographer's Eye, and there are certain parallels. The book's initial purpose was relatively simple: to introduce Shore's students to the qualities that photographs inherently possess. And as an introduction to the basic properties of photographic images, I know of no book published recently which compares. It deals with a body of thought that conventional photographic texts gloss over and it would make sense to publish a paperback edition for classroom use.

Although it is clearly written, The Nature of Photographs is not light fare, and I often found myself rereading passages. The prose is spare and unemotional and the book *does* often come across as a primer. Succinctly, Shore thinks of photographic images as possessing three distinct levels: The Physical, The Depictive and The Mental. And although these particular terms would not have occurred to me in this context, they serve well.

In Shore's lexicon, The Physical Level refers to the actual stuff of the photograph - the kind of print, the backing, whether it's made in black and white or color, the size - the object itself. The Depictive Level refers to the photographer's decision making process, as well as the viewer's interpretation of these decisions: vantage point, framing, timing and focus. The Mental Level comes into play with the transition of the image on the wall or on the page - wherever the photograph is encountered - to its new residence in a viewer's mind. And while all of this may seem a bit self-evident, the detail that Shore goes into is not, and there is much to consider.

He is clear about what the book is and what it is not. He does not deal with content or meaning - which for most of us is central to the enjoyment of a photograph. On the contrary, he plays his own responses to the images in the book remarkably close to the vest. "The aim of this book," he writes... "is not to explore photographic content but to describe physical and formal attributes of a photographic print that form the tools a photographer uses to define and interpret that content."¹ Within these boundaries, the book is clear and often illuminating.

Although The Nature of Photographs stops where imagery makes its connection to the rest of the world, it would be fascinating to see Shore take on a second book, one that might parallel Szarkowski's Looking At Photographs - a classic in speculative content. This new book might serve as a companion piece to The Nature of Photographs. I'd be interested to hear what Shore has to say about the reading of images, about photographic content. Perhaps he feels, as some do, that photographs should stay word free - luxuriating in silence. In this case of course there would be little to say. But in either instance - an essay debunking interpretive thought or a second beautifully illustrated book - many I think would listen.

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¹ Shore, Stephen, The Nature of Photographs, Phaidon, New York, 2007, p. 12