

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

August 9, 2007

## Stephen Shore responds

Filed under: vernacular & Flickr — alecsothblog @ 4:54 pm

Feeling that Stephen Shore's comments have been blown out of proportion, I emailed him to get his take on things. He promptly replied with the following:

- **Thanks for bringing this posting to my attention and thanks for giving me an opportunity to respond. I was beginning to compose my response when I saw that you posted the full context of my comments. I think that helps clarify my meaning and I appreciate your posting it. That said, my original comment was a glib generalization that was unfair to a collection of images as heterogeneous as that on Flickr.**

So enough of the Shore bashing please. If you want to go after someone, go after me. I took a small comment he made in conversation and broadcast it to a large audience to serve my own ends. It isn't like Shore made these comments in his book on photography. None of us would feel great if all of our generalizations were cut and pasted into the echo chamber of the blogosphere.

One of the things I've always treasured about this blog is the thoughtfulness and civility of debate. Mr. Shore's email goes a long way in reestablishing this quality. I urge you to respond in kind.

## 29 Comments

1. well said Alec.

personally, i don't think the conversation really had much to do with the shore comment anyway as it did with you inquiring about good photographs on flickr. that's what brought me to the conversation anyway...

*Comment by bryanF — August 9, 2007 @ 5:11 pm*

2. Bryan, I agree, it was more the vehicle to access this discussion.

*Comment by w robert angell — August 9, 2007 @ 5:27 pm*

3. All press is good press as long as the names are spelled correctly?

*Comment by Don Simon — August 9, 2007 @ 5:40 pm*

4. Look, it's good that Shore has had the chance to clarify. And it's also good that so many people got in on the discussion, which was pretty interesting. All in all I appreciated the whole dialog/debate.

It wouldn't be any fun, let alone very informative, if everyone just agreed all the time. Discussion is a good thing.

*Comment by ryan a — August 9, 2007 @ 5:49 pm*

5. Seems to me that Flickr is a tool of photography just like a digital camera is and just like 35mm and an 8x10 Deardorff is and just like any new technology it is meant with some resistance. when the 35mm was first introduced I am sure there was some turning up of the nose. Flickr as a tool has a place and it works great for viewing digital images, sharing and discussing them and meeting people. I don't think it comes close to the experience of walking up to one of Stephen Shore's 8x10 images and walking deep into the image.

I haven't had a chance to read all of the 227+ comments but it seems that Stephen Shore's comment was taken out of context much like a political sound bite.

*Comment by Harlan Erskine — August 9, 2007 @ 6:20 pm*

6. There are about 4.5 millions of flickr users, and a comment that states 'it was just thousands of pieces of shit' was inevitably going to create a fierce reaction!

The same comment, without the word 'just' would have been much fairer, don't you agree?

I was very interested by Stephen's other comment: 'The difference is that on eBay the people are not trying to make art. They are just trying to show something.'  
They are millions of photos on flickr which are just that, people snapping away and uploading the images for their long distance friends and relatives to see what they saw, without pretence to art.

Stephen Shore is looking for 'a treasure trove of brilliant untutored pictures' on the web. Flickr might as well be that place. But you have to keep your eyes open and look around to find those gems.

A lot like when you are out there looking for photos to shoot really...

*Comment by Brigitte — August 9, 2007 @ 7:12 pm*

7. I thought his reaction was perfectly valid – he can say what he wants – i don't have a problem with it and wouldn't be party to any 'bashing'.

*Comment by steven — August 9, 2007 @ 10:31 pm*

8. The only interesting thing here (literally) is that the top 1% starts meeting the bottom 99% and vice versa.

*Comment by Dirk — August 9, 2007 @ 11:15 pm*

9. i'm still confused with Mr. Soth's motivation for this all (just like the photog that had his picture placed above the "thousands of pieces of shit" comment). the question was at that point "Where are the great pictures on Flickr?". it still seems to be a question unanswered by Mr. Shore or Mr. Soth. from Mr. Soth we get that a "quick look at Flickr shows a lot of labored artistry and a lot of generic subjects". sins that are exclusive to Flickr i'm sure (not NYC galleries).

*Comment by j zorn — August 9, 2007 @ 11:49 pm*

10. bloody elitists!

*Comment by ajmiller — August 10, 2007 @ 12:59 am*

11. The great photos on Flickr are there, it just takes some luck and legwork to find them. It's no different than walking into a bookstore and digging through all the photography books until you find something worth spending a few minutes on.

It doesn't help that photography isn't just an art — it's also a mundane, practical thing that people do in their every day lives (family snapshots, etc.), and Flickr suffers from no particular problem other than being a very useful tool for \*both\* artists and non-artists alike.

*Comment by James — August 10, 2007 @ 1:34 am*

12. Next Week:

Paolo Pellegrin vs the LOLCats  
<http://icanhascheezburger.com/>

\*Sorry! Could not resist.

*Comment by BartF — August 10, 2007 @ 2:05 am*

13. oh la la..

I agree with BryanF. However, by the question where are good photographs on flickr, this might bring us to the "tastes" regarding the technique but also the esthetique of the pictures. However, I guessed the discussion was more about "what do you think of flickr". Wasn't it?

To be honest, I'm quite fascinated to the images on Flickr, socially speaking, quantitative speaking as well.

Have you every calculated how many pictures are done during a year in Paris for example?? Ok, a rapid calculation:

> The statistics of tourism in Paris in 2006 are 27 millions.

> Bearing in mind that these statistics are based on hotel nights mainly, let's say that only 15 millions are in Paris for visiting.

- > Then, let's say there are family of 3 persons with only one camera per family. So 5 millions.
- > Not all of them have a digital camera. So, 3 millions of cameras.
- > In one day of visit, only 10 pictures are taken (I would like to say much much more... but let's

be pessimistic

- > this makes then 80,000 pictures a day!
- > so check for a full year.. amazing! Paris is covered of pictures.....

The Elysée photo museum in Lausanne did a great exhibition on amateur photography ([www.elysee.ch](http://www.elysee.ch))

Please go there for Martin Parr comment:

[audio src="http://www.boring.ch/waapn/incoming/podcasts/martin\_parr.mp3" /]

and here:

<http://allphotographers.wordpress.com/>

What amazed me at this exhibition is that there were texts along the exhibition from reading the end of the texts, you realize that this was what was said in the early 20 century on film photography! Ok, sorry, difficult to explain. If I will try to ask for these texts, and if I get them I will post it to Alec.

*Comment by corinne — August 10, 2007 @ 3:19 am*

14. Go after me, Alec. Last year, I transcribed that small comment he made about flickr, and threw it at the bottom of the post, without context.

I appreciate the discussion that ensued, both then on 2point8 and here now, but I should have been smarter on the transcription front. Regards.

*Comment by MDM — August 10, 2007 @ 7:43 am*

15. I'll say this – i started off using a mobile phone on flickr and now i'm due to start an art college photography course, because of circumstances – somebody had to buy me a wee point and shoot digital camera, i was getting £190 a fortnight to live on – i had to do things like spend £100 on a used slr film camera and have £90 to live on for for the next two weeks.

Meanwhile the rest of flickr are cruising around in their suv's pausing only to take the occasional macro shot of a flower by the side of the road.

I'd like to see someone put some kind of incentives in place that maybe people could apply to help them out – and what i'm seeing is people complaining rather than attempting to offer support in any meaningful way – i think conscientious mentioned it the other day – i don't think i've seen a single initiative out there, i've seen and heard complaints – but i don't think i've really seen anyone diving in, seeking out and giving a great deal of encouragement – maybe there would be more stuff happening if there was.

*Comment by steven — August 10, 2007 @ 8:42 am*

16. I saw Mr. Shore speak in NYC very recently, and I remember thinking I was very glad to hear someone who had such a pragmatic and clear sense of photography and its history. I left wondering if Mr. Shore were beginning his career now if he wouldn't be one of Flickr's millions, and whether the Fotomat of his era wasn't Flickr + IPhoto and all the other instant processes currently swirling around. And then I saw his show at the ICP, and lo, there were several IPhoto produced photo books of Mr. Shore's work. And they fit very well in the context of his 4x6 snapshots in the next room. All this to say that the thing I took away most from Mr. Shore's presentation was a sense of the fluidity between modes of expression in photography, not the boundaries. Surfing.

*Comment by J Ake — August 10, 2007 @ 9:51 am*

17. As a former student of Stephen Shore's, I'm glad to see he is finally clarifying his words and they are being contextualized and recognized for what they were....

It should be recognized that Shore's work, from his early work using postcards or his use of vernacular photographs in the exhibition "All The Meat You Can Eat" in 1971 (a small selection of crime scene photos, postcards, pornography, U.S. Government posters) to his recent use of iPhoto and iBooks, he has embraced all aspects of photography and is hardly elitist.

Shore is an incredibly articulate and passionate advocate for photography and he deserves a great deal of respect – especially in the face of a glib comment or miscontextualized quote.

*Comment by Adam B. Bell — August 10, 2007 @ 9:56 am*

18. J Ake said: "All this to say that the thing I took away most from Mr. Shore's presentation was a sense of the fluidity between modes of expression in photography, not the boundaries. Surfing."

this is great. well said.

*Comment by bryanF — August 10, 2007 @ 11:45 am*

19. I guess maybe the next time that a person's whole comment should be put up and not just a section of it so as it can not be interpreted wrong. OH well I guess we live and learn.

*Comment by mike moreno — August 10, 2007 @ 12:19 pm*

20. Stephen Shore is a great photographer and educator , and yes , an easy going gentleman as well!

In a time not long ago, before the internet , websites , blogs and on-line commentators , I could only wonder who else was working and what they might be doing! Flickr in part has answered part of that question!

*Comment by William Greiner — August 10, 2007 @ 2:40 pm*

21. I think it's problematic to post great pictures on flickr for anyone trying to develop a career or show in a gallery. Curators, the few that I know, would likely not take an image seriously if posted on a photoblog. I think that part of the work in getting one's photos on to gallery walls is (beyond making technically great pictures and crafting the dialogue and mystique which surrounds the work), is setting the pictures aside with a little bit of reverence. Blog posts are short-lived, yesterdays news already.

I think Stephen's comments were on point. Perhaps he or someone else should start a website, invite photographers to only send their best images, politely reject 99.9% of the work, and curate that fantastic place on the internet that he was seeking. I too would love to see it.

*Comment by Craig McCormick — August 10, 2007 @ 3:07 pm*

22. "Perhaps he or someone else should start a website, invite photographers to only send their best images, politely reject 99.9% of the work, and curate that fantastic place on the internet that he was seeking."

believe it or not one of the best things about flickr for me is that it gives me the opportunity to edit large pools of photographs. where else would a complete newbie amateur get that chance?

editing and curating on flickr is probably what has helped me improve the most. it forces you to make decisions and decided what you like. i see so many people that just want to like everything and they end up wading in a sea of photographs that look the same.

peace.

*Comment by bryanF — August 10, 2007 @ 3:28 pm*

23. Shore's generalization was valid and hit home, and that's why there was a huge response. I'm a fan of Shore's work and Soth's. I liked the comment and the thread. It made me think about how I use flickr, and why that may be good or not good. Alec Soth is not afraid to ask questions that might open up a can of worms, and that's why I like reading the blog. Bashing either photographer does not make a case for art on Flickr.

When I first saw Shore's photograph "Beverly Boulevard and Lebrea Avenue, Los Angeles California, 21 June 1975" I was drawn by the lines. The implication that there's a similar gas station and set of strip stores on the next corner is so directly implied.

Today, I might go to a certain hair cut place and then to the next if the place is full, and there is a subtle difference but a certain sameness — or I might go to a Mexican restaurant and, another time, to a family bar and grill. Although the food is completely different, it tastes kind of the same. Then, I find out the stores are owned by the same parent company, and the influence makes sense. It's good enough and that's why I go back, but there is a manufactured feel and guiding influence that is similar. There's a formula that works for a lot of people, so it's repeated.

When I look at interestingness — the stream of daily popular photographs thought interesting by flickr editors — there is a certain sameness and iconography of many of the shots that stroll by. They are all unique and wonderful. But the HDR architecture shots have a certain feel. There's the tight bug shot with blurred background, the sports pan, and the tight kid shot that's been edited heavily with effects like Gaussian blur. There's a lot of heavy-handed contrast, saturation, blurring, flickr tools, etc. To me, there is a lot of iconography present amongst the tight rule of thirds photos with a singular theme and dramatic processing effect. There are lots of exceptions, but chances are fair that the next shot around the corner is going to have the same interestingness. It will fit somehow with the rest. I've also noticed that the top images on photo.net and other sites also seem to have almost a look. To find or make images you like the best, you have to seek them out; it takes effort.

That said, flickr is the C.D. and the medium of now. Flickr defines photography for lots of people. I find the most interesting images on flickr are the ones that don't try too hard to be Art. Many of my favorites photographs look like lucky snapshots.

If you're into pictures — almost, all of them — it's hard to resist using the convenience of flickr on some level, and curators should spend more time on flickr rather than using it as a qualifier for bad taste. A great image, regardless of the medium, is not quickly forgotten, and if it is forgotten it can be rediscovered. Disfarmer is the one that quickly comes to mind: <http://disfarmer.org/>

One thing I like about flickr is that the balance of the feedback is overwhelmingly encouraging and positive. I'm amazed that this is true of something so common and universal\*, but for some reason they've pulled it off. This can be both good and bad, but for me it helps with the fear I have over sharing all sorts of images. The flip side is that the feedback is usually kept pretty short. I share images on Flickr (shit or not, art or not) that I would not otherwise — because...it's fun. Fun is the main point of flickr; if some people feel that art was made, that's a bonus.

Perhaps, the challenge for fairly new photographers like myself is to approach their work carefully and don't let the convenience of flickr dumb down their overall process. Use the tool; don't let it dictate. If they need to have a set of fine art images and a different set of flickr snaps, that might work — whatever it takes to stoke the thoughtful process or project-oriented approach.

I have an idea for Alec Soth. There are some fine art online galleries online, but they could be better and they don't come with the convenience of a submission interface like Flickr's. Perhaps, you could donate some of your time to create and administer an invitation only flickr group and make the great photographers convenient to find on Flickr. I'm sure some people would be very grateful. I would love to see your collection of favorites. Or not...time is precious. It's all good.

\*People, ying yangers all of them, love to bitch as much as they like complement, as this thread illustrates.

*Comment by Randy Douglas — August 10, 2007 @ 4:07 pm*

24. *I left wondering if Mr. Shore were beginning his career now if he wouldn't be one of Flickr's millions, and whether the Fotomat of his era wasn't Flickr + IPhoto and all the other instant processes currently swirling around.*

I don't know – how many Flickr members manage to walk into the Museum of Modern Art at age 14 and leave having sold Edward Steichen (I guess Peter Galassi these days...) three of their photographs?

*Comment by Tim Atherton — August 10, 2007 @ 10:34 pm*

25. btw is there any chance of getting rid of that video on your page ? i'm not in the us and it gives an error message, forcing the browser to that part of the blog every time – thankyou : )

*Comment by steven — August 11, 2007 @ 8:06 pm*

26. whats happening?... where is bumdog?

*Comment by w robert angell — August 12, 2007 @ 4:08 am*

27. August Sander...

*Comment by w robert angell — August 12, 2007 @ 4:48 am*

28. I'm honestly a little disappointed at how fast Shore was to retract his comment. If you're going to make such a strong statement, you best be prepared to stand up to the criticism that comes with it. What really bothers me about Flickr is the endless, enthusiastic, positive responses that are made about people's images. I wouldn't consider Flickr a fine art database and definitely not a valid means for critiquing "art."

*Comment by eli — August 13, 2007 @ 12:46 pm*

29. Flickr is a vast repository of images for innumerable purposes. Do a search on your favorite private body part, farm implement or food group, for instance, and you will be rewarded with dozens or even hundreds of "groups" entirely devoted to that particular subject. Fine art photography can also be one of the subjects and you will find mostly amateur efforts in that broad group of topics, but you will also find a few emerging talents that will undoubtedly become our future commercial photographers, illustrators, and even fine art photographers.

*Comment by Steve Murray — August 28, 2007 @ 9:39 am*