

Dismantling My Career: A Conversation with Alec Soth

By Bartholomew Ryan, Assistant Curator, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The exhibition *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* opened at the Walker in September 2010. The following conversation took place between Assistant Curator Bartholomew Ryan and Alec Soth in 2009. The conversation begins with a discussion of Soth's new body of work *Broken Manual*, and goes on to include other pursuits that inform his photography practice such as blogging and book publishing.

Bartholomew Ryan:

In 2007 you were invited by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta to make new work for its *Picturing the South* photography series, a commission that concluded with a recent exhibition there.<1> But this project expanded very soon into *Broken Manual*.

Alec Soth:

These last couple of years have been about taking apart everything I know—*Broken Manual*. The reason it's broken has a lot to do with the fact that I can't escape all these outside pressures. It did start as this commission, but then I started dismantling the project.

Just yesterday I was doing an online interview. One of the questions was: "What's the project that has the most meaning for you?" And if I were just going to answer off the top of my head, it would be *Sleeping by the Mississippi* because there's just nothing like that first time where you don't know what you're doing. You're neck-deep into the work. What I've been trying to get back to—and in a funny way, what I am now at this moment getting back to—is that newness.

BR:

Do you consider *Broken Manual* to be a body of work on the scale of *NIAGARA* or *Sleeping by the Mississippi*?

AS:

It's funny because there's a dual impulse to have it be the next big thing and to hide it. To pull away. I've come to think of this body of work, and this exhibition, as the ceremonial ending of something and the beginning of something else. I don't exactly know what, but it feels like that.

In its beginnings, [*Broken Manual*] was about that desire to run away, but it was never going to be a documentary of people who ran away. It was my thinking, "What is it, this desire to run away?" Then over time it's become about the desire to run away and the knowledge that you can't. Over and over I photograph these people, and everyone says, "How do you find hermits?" And the answer is: on the Internet.

If not that, then I find them driving down a road somewhere. A road is connected to another road. Presumably, there are some people out there who are totally off the grid in every sort of way.

When I started this project, I wanted to get away from photographing people. I was tired of that exchange. But then, how do I photograph this subject of “retreat”? The initial idea was to photograph people from really far away. For the most part, I continued with that, though I’d have some basic craving to get closer to them. At one point, I really did make an effort to buy a cave.

BR:

Buy a cave?

AS:

Yeah. On the last trip I did for the project, I didn’t take any pictures. It was just to look for caves. And ideally, I was looking for one a few hours away. My family would say, “Well, what are you going to do with a cave?” And the answer is, “Not much. I would just know that I had it.” I was closing in on one in Missouri. But then the economy went, and I decided I just can’t spend this kind of money, because it was land for an idea.

BR:

In an American sense, this desire for solitude goes back at least to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. It’s funny because with *Sleeping by the Mississippi* there was the specter of Mark Twain. And now we have Thoreau lingering in the background—this notion of self-reliance.

AS:

This is where *Broken Manual* really comes close to *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, because there you have the idea that you get on a boat and float away. It’s very similar to that.

BR:

I’m quite curious about these new characters. Now I’m wondering: do these people own their caves? What is their relationship to public space?

AS:

I thought about this a lot because with my own cave, I needed to own it. It was fundamental. I thought it would be really easy to ask some farmer, “Can I rent your cave for a couple years?” But that takes out everything I want from it. In terms of these people, there’s a huge variety. There’s this guy who has a whole mountain and it’s worth millions of dollars. He ran away from home, was living outdoors, and his parents just bought him this thing that was quite cheap at the time. And now, thirty years later, it’s worth a lot of money. Everything from that to, essentially, a homeless person just living somewhere.

BR:

These are very intense people you are tracking. For example, the large photograph of the guy standing naked in a desert oasis. When you look closely, there’s a swastika on his arm, and it comes as a shock. The image presents, in a way, the ultimate in a separatist white idyll. Other people may see drug or alcohol problems, or schizophrenia, even. I was thinking about encountering these people who are always at certain extremes, and there being something slightly traumatic about that. I’m thinking of the photojournalists who came back from Vietnam, but it also reminds me of looking for an apartment in New York one time via Craigslist. People

would open the door, and just feeling these lives—even just stepping into somebody’s subjective space for a moment—could be so incredibly depressing. What’s it like to carry these intensities with you?

AS:

How to answer that? Fundamentally, the work is about wanting to run away. And you would say, “Why would you want to run away, Alec? You’ve got a wife, two kids, nice house.”

Comfortable—what is that? I don’t know what it is, but it’s something that a lot of people have. Then you go out looking, and you see these lives. It’s something like, “Yeah, okay. You have the cave and it’s nice. You sleep with the dog, and …” But, over and over again, you do see real misery. So then you’ve witnessed the fact that, with these people, something’s broken and that more often than not, there is a real hunger to engage with me. So, if I were to really leave my life, I would desperately miss it, and people. It’s a case of the grass is always greener. It’s both being attracted to it, and then when you’re in it, a bit repelled.

And on the issue of the swastika—I asked him a lot about that, and it was so clearly a case of being completely naïve. I didn’t want to exploit that as a major topic because I felt like the religious impulse of becoming a monk or something is not that different. It’s just a different shade of the same thing, which is this hunger to latch onto some sort of system. Because there’s always a belief system that’s connecting you to other people.

But you know what’s really interesting about him? You know the older guy who I said lives on millions of dollars of mountain? He was the guy I was going to visit. That young guy with the swastika was living on his property. The older guy is a total hippie. Not Nazi at all. I think he’s gay, and likes having the young guy around. The young guy is a bit lost in life, and he hates his parents, but it shows you—in both cases—how they’re not alone at all.

BR:

I’m from Ireland, and I have some sense of how Europeans think of America. It would be easy to see in this work something very exoticizing, but also really tragic, or crazy, or all of the above. Living off the grid can be sad, but living on the grid can be sad, too. Seeing that our framework here is America, people can rage against consumerism and the way in which the individual becomes this collection of subjectivities manufactured by commodities that describe their identity. But there is something very interesting in America: everybody has some sense of themselves that is very fundamentally theirs to express.

AS:

As a whole, there is something really sad about this project. And I do think it’s the sadness of rampant individualism. Last night, I watched American Idol. It’s one of the few things a large percentage of the culture watches, and it’s something we can all engage in. This classic Italian guy was on. Every week, his extended family gets together for dinner, and I think, “God, to be that person. Wouldn’t that be great?” If I could enjoy that, rather than wanting to run for the hills. I think this work is an expression of the sadness of that longing to be apart, to be an individual. Also, the inevitable failure of it. You’re always connected in one way or another, and need connection. People always say to me, “Your pictures are so lonely.” I think if you look at the vast majority of the books [I’ve collected here in the studio] with pictures, they’re lonely.

Photography is a very lonely medium. There's a kind of beautiful loneliness in voyeurism. And that's why I'm a photographer.



Alec Soth, 2008_02zl0189, 2008 from Broken Manual

BR:

I've read some of Lester B. Morrison's texts that accompany the manuscript version of the *Broken Manual* book.<2> His name is a play off your publishing imprint and blog Little Brown Mushroom—LBM. It also plays off the “less is more” refrain of high modernism. You've also mentioned that “little brown mushroom” is the shorthand used in the field for species that experts can't distinguish from others. When did you first meet Lester?

AS:

Probably a long time ago, as a child. We grew up past the suburbs, so I spent a lot of time alone. I had a brother, but we never played together. I was always in the woods playing. I was famous for having pretend friends as a child, and this whole cast of characters. Imaginary worlds and forts and all that kind of stuff. So Lester is a chance to play those games again.

BR:

In 2004 you were nominated to the Magnum photographic cooperative and have since become a full member. As a fine-art photographer, what was it about this institution, which is traditionally for photojournalists, that attracted you?

AS:

I'm just never comfortable in the art world, because it doesn't exactly exist in Minnesota. Of course, we have museums, we have this and that. But the heart of it in the United States is New York and Los Angeles. I'm not exactly comfortable in it, and I don't believe in every element of it. I always felt that I had to have a job. Magnum is a way to work with legendary photographers. It's a way to expand my career in different directions. So it was like, boom! You're dropped down in this assignment; you have no idea how to do it. But you have to produce something, and it's going to get published, and thousands of people are going to see it. And that was all really exciting. A lot of that has worn off now. I mean, it was fun, but also that industry has changed dramatically, just in the last year.

If you say, "I am a photographer," what you are doing is aligning yourself with the technology. And that is what's problematic about it, particularly because the technology has just been changing relentlessly. I came to Magnum in this odd way—I use really old technology, which is not that applicable to photojournalism, but because of my credibility in the art world, I get jobs. Gilles Peress, a photojournalist at Magnum, one of the great thinkers about all of this, often says, "If I have to hang the picture in your bedroom and show it to you that way, I'll do it that way." There's a bit of that for me. This high/low stuff . . . not worrying so much about it. I want to make stuff, and I want other people to experience it. That's the biggest thing.

Last night, I got word that Dennis Stock died. He was a Magnum photographer, and Dennis and I had a contentious relationship at Magnum. He was this lovable old-school guy, and something like *Broken Manual*, which I showed at a certain point, he completely didn't get. He stood up in front of all the members and said, "A total lack of craftsmanship."

One of the things he always talked about was that Magnum is in the business of making icons. His picture of James Dean walking down Times Square: we all know it. And for me, it's Charles with the two airplanes. I think in Magnum's case, that is how the business works in a lot of ways.

Not too long ago, I was at a drawing show in a museum. I realized I like the preparatory drawings more than the finished paintings. I like the idea of the process. And I'm less interested in the masterpiece, or the icon.

BR:

What do you think Dennis Stock meant, from his perspective, by "a total lack of craft"?

AS:

I was showing really grainy pictures that had dust and scratches.

BR:

As simple as that?

AS:

Yeah, as simple as that. I mean, there was a time when making a good picture was a difficult thing to do. In the photo galleries at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), they have two Ansel Adams prints next to each other. A comparison talking about how he was able to achieve this other kind of print years after the first kind. And now, I hand the camera to my seven-year-old daughter. I put it on “program,” and she makes a stunning picture in terms of technical quality. There’s nothing to it anymore.

BR:

When the I-35W bridge over the Mississippi collapsed here in 2007, you asked yourself for a moment whether you should go and photograph it, especially as a Magnum photojournalist. Your response was no; you called your family and friends instead.

AS:

I struggled with this even earlier with Katrina; because of the Mississippi River project, everyone thought, “Oh, Alec should go to Katrina.” I wrote about this issue of how many people like me—these fine-art quasi-photojournalists—went there and made pictures, and I think there’s something problematic in it. The cell phone photo culture has changed everything. Everything can be documented. I sometimes think those cell phone pictures are more meaningful in terms of their craft—and lack thereof—than someone trying to get the right angle and the right light and all that.

BR:

Elsewhere you have pointed out that you are the only Magnum photographer between LA and New York, so why go to far-flung places when you have all this terrain to cover?

AS:

In terms of being in the middle, I do feel like I’m interested in photographing and showing America. Over the past few years, I’ve driven around the country with European filmmakers, and also a British journalist who was on assignment. Anyway, I’m experiencing the country with these other people, and I’m not exactly defensive, and not exactly proud. But I just think it’s a more interesting place than people give it credit for. It’s not all strip malls, and there are these subtleties and interesting stories. I do feel compelled to do that work, and to play that role for Magnum, rather than just going to Lebanon or something.

BR:

In Ireland, our experience of American culture was often related to the travel-show genre (Borat [the character created by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen] would be a contemporary spinoff) in which these very worthy BBC-type documentarians meet people who go out on the firing range with their fifteen-year-old carrying automatic rifles or some such. It would turn into this “God, Americans are so crazy” freak show. How do you navigate, for example, your understanding of the nuances of the Midwest, which to other people might seem like a very general place? For those in Europe, or in centers such as New York and LA, your subjects can be consumed in a certain way: idealized, pitied, even mocked.

AS:

There are two different answers. When I'm doing assignment work, I do feel a certain responsibility to not turn it up to eleven. The personal work is different. This is the highly problematic nature of what I do. I'm using real people, real lives to create my little art project. It's a problematic medium. It's the Arbus problem.

BR:

You once described Peter Hujar as less sensational than Diane Arbus, and more raw than Richard Avedon.

AS:

I'm crazy about him still. The freak show elements of Arbus do sometimes get in the way. There is an intense humanity to her work, but when it's too much, you see that instead of the humanity. With Hujar, it's a direct line to one of his animal portraits, where there's nothing wacky about it. You can experience that, and then go to a portrait of a person. I guess it's learning to know how to have an intense exchange with someone, but not turn it into a caricature. But it's a fine line.

BR:

I find Crystal to be a very interesting example of this . . .

AS:

Someone just e-mailed me out of the blue a couple of months ago from Alaska. He was really upset about that picture of Crystal. "I think it ruins the end of the book. What's your reason?" he asked. It was funny to be put on the spot, but I went through the explanation—it was taken at Easter, this whole thing about living the life you want to live, transformation. There were all these intellectual reasons for it. But that doesn't mean that people don't see it in the gallery and go, "ha ha ha." And the picture of the heavysset naked couple in *NIAGARA* is the ultimate example of that. Often you see a group of people making jokes about them, and then other people are deeply moved by them.



Alec Soth, Michele and James, 2004

BR:

I keep coming back to these two photographs, and I think it's because they can provoke these reactions.

AS:

There is an intensity to those pictures that does make you pay attention. That's what you're always battling, that line. That is the Arbus problem.

BR:

Take Joel Sternfeld. There's something about the way he photographs people. And there's something about the way you photograph people. Why is it so similar and yet so different, from photographer to photographer, once you get to know their work? It is a very peculiar breed that

can actually do this thing, both in terms of the interactions with the subject necessary to get an image, and the fundamental investment of their subjectivity that somehow manages to survive the filter of a machine.

AS:

There was this blog recently complaining about the term “emerging photographers,” particularly the word “emerging,” and New York magazine critic Jerry Saltz posted a response saying that people need to get rid of the word “photographer.” <5> But I sort of hate that. It’s kind of like being a saxophonist who plays in an orchestra and being embarrassed to say, “I’m a saxophonist.” Because like anything, it’s all about subtleties. Joel Sternfeld was a teacher of mine at Sarah Lawrence so, inevitably, I get compared to him. For a long time I tried to run away from it, but then I accepted his influence and worked through it. You find your own little path that’s just subtly different. And in a way, that is what being a photographer is. We’re all using these machines, and by doing it over and over and over again, you find your own voice, but it’s just modestly different than someone else’s. And how do you describe that? How do you describe the difference between these two saxophone players?

BR:

In places outside the museum and gallery centers, many photographers are known not through their prints on a wall, but through photography books. Why is the book format so important to your work?

AS:

My first book, *From Here to There*, exemplifies all of my struggles as a photographer, because it tried to tell the story of this journey from one thing to the next. <6> It’s my fight with language and telling stories. I realized it was way too heavy on words, so I abandoned that. And lo, all these years later, I find myself coming back to it.

Sleeping by the Mississippi is a contained experience, so it’s fully authored by the artist from beginning to end. And it’s a private experience. I think something about photography functions well that way. Photographs also, unlike painting and sculpture, are fully reproducible. That is the art. Right there in the book. And it’s not necessarily different from the actual print, or just a bit. Anyone can take a great picture, but to construct this thing in which the pictures speak to each other is not easy.

This is something that is different—just to get back to Magnum a little bit—with that generation of icon photographers. They don’t think about the book that way. Usually, their books are greatest hits compiled together, which is generally not at all interesting in terms of that photo-book tradition. So there are these different camps.

BR:

Tell me about the activity around your new blog.

AS:

I’ve been on this search to re-create things. To get back to the primary spirit of making something that’s not necessarily for the marketplace. I also got really involved in books and

book-collecting. And I had this idea of creating a little mini business. Not really a for-profit business, but something to play with that was outside of my regular art-making. So I started Little Brown Mushroom Books.

BR:

You have also started making video slide shows that you post to the blog and elsewhere. *Glass Jars* is the first, a really dark piece about the Mohler family, in which children supposedly buried their traumatic secrets about abuse in glass jars in their yard. And then in 2009, the perpetrators, five men from one family, were charged. In the video you go to Missouri, where the children are from, you call up the local police station, and ask for details about these glass jars. You say you are a journalist. I was thinking, “Alec’s lying there.” And then I thought, “No, he is a photojournalist.” It’s a strange piece because you know what you’re doing when you make that phone call, and you’re very clearly displaying a tabloidesque curiosity that feels slightly tawdry. And I think you’re aware of that, right?

AS:

This is part of me dismantling my career. [laughs] No, it is. I talk a lot about these ethical issues about using people, right? It’s a very common question for me: do I get permission when I take people’s pictures? And I say, “Yes,” and I send them a copy of the picture and they usually sign a release, and that’s a way of getting rid of guilt. Because early on, I didn’t do that. I would sometimes say I would send someone a picture and I wouldn’t, and I had a lot of built-up guilt. So I tried to be ethically better about this. Then, over the last year, I’ve thrown my ethics out the window in some ways. I was always a believer in being honest about what I was doing. In *Glass Jars*, I am lying. I’m not going to say to the guy, “I’m an artist and I’m experimenting with this new form.” I was lying.

These little online storytelling experiments in the form of video slide shows are truly experimental. Here is a way I can just put them out into the world and play around. And that’s the idea. It’s a place to play.

BR:

When you said “journalist,” were you thinking Magnum?

AS:

No, no. I wasn’t thinking Magnum at all, but I’m playing as though I’m doing that kind of work. Someone wrote in the blog comments, “This is sleazy exploitation,” or something like that.

BR:

This is inherent to the act of photography itself. You’ve talked about Henri Cartier-Bresson’s quote on photographers, “Hunters aren’t cooks.” And recently I read this very eloquent Stephen Shore passage about the process of taking a photograph with an 8 x 10, saying (more or less), “I can’t quite talk about what it is that’s happening, but I can talk about it in relationship to fishing—fly-fishing.” <7>

AS:

That book you’re talking about, incidentally, *Uncommon Places*, is one of the books that

changed me. That passage was everything for me, because in the end, it's all about the process. The fact that he added that piece to that book, I could feel being him, making those pictures, which I think is such a big part of how photography works. One of the ways I see photography as different from conventional storytelling is that in some ways, the photographer is the protagonist. You experience their movement. I could feel it.

One thing I'm really interested in is vulnerability. When you talk about Arbus and Hujar . . . I like being exposed to vulnerabilities. I think there's something really beautiful about it. That's kind of what I've been doing with these little stories, amping up the vulnerability, but also my own vulnerabilities, exposing more of myself. Because I knew with that "journalist" line I'm exposing my own shit there. I'm trying to get down to something raw.

BR:

You have become known as the guy who does Charles, who has this piercing eye for the American psyche. Yet there has always been this other sensibility. In the book *From Here to There*, for instance, you tell a true story about knocking on the door of William Eggleston's house, and spending the day with him. There's a point where he takes you stamp-shopping. He goes to buy some Turkish stamps, and returns home, leaving the stamps in your car. He and his wife are having a drink or two. You're trying to get a photograph of him and he's not behaving. He's not being the perfect subject. You're trying to get him out on the porch so you can shoot him in light, because you want to emulate Eggleston light. Eventually, you get this wonderful photograph of him at his keyboard, and then his wife kicks you out, and says, "He won't even remember you in the morning." And the fact that you would write all of that is pretty intrusive. It's a private space you were invited into. And then, what to me is the odd bit, you mention still having the stamps, as if you accidentally drove off with them. You could've mailed them back to him or something. There's that idea of taking something away.



Alec Soth, William Eggleston in His Music Room, Memphis, Tennessee 2000

AS:

At the end of *Glass Jars*, I take the glass jar from the Mohlers' porch—and what I didn't mention in the video is, I also took two college yearbooks. I mean, I stole them. It's a criminal act. I always laugh, because there are these books on Zen photography at Barnes & Noble. I think photography is the most anti-Zen activity. It's all about stopping time, possessing things, holding onto them. And you know, if my goal was to be a healthy person, photography would not be the thing. I have this joke about becoming a binoculographer: you go around and look at the world without photographing. That would be a spiritually healthy way of taking things in. But this wanting to possess it is not so healthy.

BR:

You made another video recently, in the same formal vein, called *The Democratic Labradoodle* [see image at top of blog]. I don't think you've posted it yet. Maybe you're in the Oedipal stage, murdering your fathers or something. You're in Memphis again with Misha, your dog, sitting on a bed in a motel, drinking a bourbon on ice, telling Misha what you're going to do tomorrow. It is very do-it-yourself, and maybe has a little daytime soap feeling. You're talking about Eggleston's book *The Democratic Forest*, in which he celebrated being able to shoot anything he came across and having it compose the book or series.<8>

AS:
Right.

BR:
You're questioning this philosophy, saying, "How can this work now?" There's an apparent ennui about the absolute hyper-image state we live in. And you're saying, "Well, I'm going to experiment. Tomorrow, I'm going to walk seven miles to William Eggleston's house, and I'm going to photograph things along the way and I'm going to see if I can photograph him." So then it's just a slide show of you and Misha on a walk. And of course that conceptual parameter is what gives shapes to those images, and they're actually really interesting and beautiful. I don't know if you feel that way.

AS:
I felt like it's not a bad book. Not a bad Eggleston book. I'm actually not killing the father, though I know that's in there. But I am interested in killing that genre of photography going forward. It exists in the history of the medium that you shoot the mundane and make it beautiful, right? So people used to take pictures of old barns. Now we all see an old barn and we say, "Wow, that's beautiful." It's a photo cliché so you don't shoot that, but the world thinks they're beautiful. That sort of goes on through time. And Eggleston took it to another level with a book such as *The Democratic Forest*. Just anything, and you can find beauty in it. And I agree with that. But the issue is now, in the digital age, it's relentless. You have tens of thousands of photographers working that way. It's really hard to have that moment.

One thing I thought about on that little walk is [the scene] in *American Beauty* with the floating plastic bag. That scene has become iconic. I photographed a lot of plastic bags on that walk. In a way, they're like the old barns. We find the floating bag beautiful now because of that movie, but it's just harder and harder to do that.

I always used to lecture about how photographs can't tell stories, because they're these fragmentary moments in time, and so you can't get any kind of arc to a story. You're making these little points and you're pushing the viewer to make connections between them. It's not true storytelling. This relates to the conversation about book sequencing. It's such a difficult thing because there never really is a beginning, middle, and end.

People always wonder how you know when you're done with a project. It's not like there's any natural end to any of this because it doesn't work like a story—you know, solve the murder and now it's over. There isn't a natural order to something like *Broken Manual*. Throw the photographs up in the air, let them fall, and that might be a good selection.

BR:
You obviously are very aware of the array of artistic strategies within photography, and elsewhere. What is your relationship to avant-garde experimentalism?

AS:
It's within me to go into the basement and do finger painting. This room we're in is a little bit of that. I've had conflicting impulses. I've gone through phases where I have renewed interest in

someone like Stan Brakhage—the 1959 film *Window Water Baby Moving* is an example. This hermetic interior language—there’s a part of me that wants to go that route. I want to make things that communicate to other people. But at the same time, I have my own interior desires that I’m trying to deal with.

BR:

What I’m getting at is this relationship between your education, exposure to theory, experimental practices, etc., and then you as an artist maturing and developing your own voice that must for you exist in relation to that knowledge. For example, you recently exhibited a number of your portraits of women at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.<9> During a gallery talk, you spoke about this in relationship to Garry Winogrand’s *Women are Beautiful*, which was published in 1975, the same year as Laura Mulvey’s famous essay on the objectifying implications of the male gaze.<10> Of course, you would have been schooled in the responsibility of the gaze through a 1980s arts background, which Winogrand clearly did not care about. Do you think about these theoretical/political questions in relation to your work?

AS:

I’m trying not to think about it. I’m trying to be real about it. I hated *Women are Beautiful* when I was at Sarah Lawrence. I thought it was ridiculous. But often when you have strong feelings against something, you realize there is some other reason. Then I finally bought the book, and in fact it’s stupid. It is. But there’s something honest about the impulse, and I appreciate that.

BR:

What for me occurs with a lot of your work is—and you might hate this idea—that there’s kind of a Derridean *sous rature* at work, meaning the approach itself is operating “under erasure.” You’re doing it—you’re making *Glass Jars*, for example, but because there’s awareness of the problematic history that came before, and an understanding of this inherent quality of photography, it seems less fraught because it’s self-aware, in other words.

AS:

Right. No. I am self-aware, for better or worse.

BR:

How do you think about eroticism in relation to your work?

AS:

I think it’s a big part of it, and it’s weird how seldom it comes up in these interview situations. Going back all the way to *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, I really didn’t have the idea—legitimately—that it was going to be beyond a McKnight show.<11> But, consequently, I felt free to explore whatever caught my fancy, such as brothels and that kind of stuff.

I put the brothels with prisons, in that body of work. There’s actually a sexual element with prisons. At the time, I was watching that prison show *Oz*. It was really realistic and brutal, and I was so terrified and intrigued by that world that I just wanted to look at it a little bit. And I’ve always felt like there’s some prison project waiting in the wings for me, because I’m totally

tantalized by that. People talk about how sex sells. It is a fact that when I've photographed prettier women, the pictures sell.

BR:
For example?

AS:
Natalia. That picture sells everywhere. People love it. The joke here at the studio is that the next project I do is all bearded men.



Alec Soth, Natalia (after) 2007 from Fashion Magazine

I'll never forget the time when I gave a lecture on *NIAGARA*, and the first question was about my relationship with my wife. Which is really, really bold, but I loved it because it's like we're

talking about something real. The dedication in the *NIAGARA* book is to my high school sweetheart, who is actually Rachel, my wife. I've been with her my whole sexual life. So a lot of it is imagining other lives, just as one imagines prison.

NIAGARA did have a lot to do with being married, because I have a distrust of new love. It's doomed not to sustain itself. And so it was me as a forever married person thinking, "Oh, wouldn't that be fun?" But also thinking about the destructiveness of it. With *Broken Manual*, there's a desire to run away from sexuality altogether. I've thought a lot about how beards are a way of desexualizing yourself. Covering yourself up. So, all that's in there, for sure.

We've talked about Charles and the men in *Broken Manual*, but in many ways I am closer to *The Loneliest Man In Missouri* than I am to these people. I live in Minneapolis, I drive a minivan. It was going to be *The Loneliest Man In Minneapolis* at one point, but then I thought, that's too easy. And I wanted to go even more to the middle by going to Missouri, but there is definitely a self-portrait aspect to this whole thing. I officially hit midlife recently. Forty years old. And this dismantling of everything that I'm doing is very midlife crisis.

BR:

You've talked about reading Robert Frank's Guggenheim Fellowship application for a grant that would ultimately lead to his legendary 1958 book *The Americans*.^{<12>} He basically says, "Look, I'm going to wander around and take photographs. Deal with it. I have vision." And that's what he does. He creates something of a typology of very different moments in American culture. Your work is not like that. There's a geographical logic to it, certainly, but you're not explicitly following political or economic hot-button topics or stories.

AS:

But see, I think that stuff's overstated in Robert Frank. Let's just talk Frank for a little bit in relation to this bigger topic of America. First of all, when I first saw Robert Frank, it wasn't this transformational thing for me the way it is for everyone else. I came to admire him much later. But I think I'm doing very similar things to what he's doing in a way that's quite different from, say, Joel Sternfeld. And this is where I'm able to distinguish these things, because Sternfeld is actually more of a social documentarian. He really is interested in the social issues of the day, looking at them and thinking about changes.

I don't think that's what Robert Frank was about. I think he was this Swiss guy coming to America, driving around, feeling enchanted and lonely simultaneously, and it just so happens that he encounters America and aspects of it and documents some of that. And then the work is read as a commentary on America. But the work is so much about the tortured soul of Robert Frank. And that becomes super evident in later work.

I wish I was Sternfeld. I wish I cared more, that I was less self-indulgent. That was always my problem with later Frank work: he's overdone it on the self-indulgence. He was always this tortured soul, but he went out into the world. And now, he's staying in the basement. And ironically, I've now moved into the basement a little bit. I would always talk about doing editorial work as a way to not become overly self-indulgent. To keep going out. And my

argument was that working photographers have longer careers, but in fact, that's bullshit. There's no formula for having a sustained career.

BR:

There are a number of prominent artists in Minneapolis who are well known internationally. You're one of them. Why did you stay? Why don't you live in New York or LA, for example?

AS:

I am a Minnesotan. Writers are allowed to live where they live. But there's something about being an artist that historically meant you had to move to New York. It's really stupid, if you think about it. Because the subject matter, presumably, exists out there. And all these photographers that I know in New York can't photograph in New York, and they go other places to photograph. I am of this place. It drives me crazy, and I fantasize about living other places, but New York is not one of them. I am interested in regional art in that there are these little regional differences to things that are quite interesting.

BR:

If you could use a few adjectives to describe Minnesotans, what would they be?

AS:

"Friendly" and "remote."

BR:

To me it's a very interesting place. Just take a few names: Prince, Garrison Keillor, Judy Garland, Paul Wellstone, Al Franken, Michele Bachmann, Jesse Ventura. That's a rather interesting panoply of individuals.

AS:

It's a really odd mix.

BR:

You could do this about anywhere, but it feels like most of us from outside Minnesota receive our schooling via *A Prairie Home Companion* on Minnesota Public Radio or the Coen Brothers, or both.

AS:

Garrison and the Coen Brothers both have that element of friendly and remote. You know what I mean?

BR:

But Garrison can be a real . . .

AS:

You think he's all warm and fuzzy . . .

BR:
Until you actually pay attention.

AS:
Exactly.

BR:
I'm going to conclude with a Diane Sawyer–style question. At the end of a trailer for an upcoming documentary about your work, you are shown standing on a snow-covered road looking into the distance. Along comes this large white text that reads, “What Are You Really Searching For?” So, Alec Soth . . .

AS:
Wow! Oh my God. That's funny. I'm glad we're not being filmed right now. This is such a culmination. This last year, I've been in a lot of therapy. Seriously. Things like *Glass Jars* come out of that. I'm not going to talk in a lot of depth, but it does. This is such a therapy question moment. It's so easy to be trite in this situation.

BR:
It's a trite question, but let's pretend it's not.

AS:
No, but it's easy to give a trite answer, and it's so much more interesting to be honest. What I'm searching for is two totally conflicting things: to be totally alone and content by myself, but loved and adored by millions of people. And know it.



Alec Soth, 2007_10zl0094, 2007 from *Broken Manual*

Notes

<1> The High Museum of Art exhibition *Alec Soth: Black Line of Woods* (August 8, 2009–January 3, 2010) featured twelve large archival pigment prints. Soth was the sixth artist to be chosen by the museum to participate in its *Picturing the South* photography series, in which artists are invited to make work inspired by the rural American South. The other artists selected so far are Dawoud Bey, Emmett Gowin, Sally Mann, Richard Misrach, and Alex Webb.

<2> In manuscript stage at the time of this interview, *Broken Manual* is an Alec Soth/Lester B. Morrison–authored book of photography and text, forthcoming in 2010 from Steidl in Göttingen, Germany.

<3> Magnum Photos is a cooperative owned and run by its member photographers, who retain their own image copyrights and use the organization for help in managing commissions, distribution, and royalties. Once a nominee is elected to full membership, it is conferred for life. Soth became a nominee of Magnum in 2004, and a full member in 2008. The cooperative was founded in 1947 to allow photographers such as Robert Capa, Henry Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger, and David “Chim” Seymour to operate outside the payment and editorial formulas of magazine journalism at the time. Today Magnum has offices in New York, Paris, London, and Tokyo.

<4> In June and July 2008, Soth was commissioned by Britain’s *Telegraph Magazine* to collaborate with journalist Mick Brown on four articles that would investigate the contrasting fortunes of the United States and China.

In 2008 and 2009, Soth was accompanied by French filmmakers Laure Flammarion and Arnaud Uyttenhove on road trips around the United States that collectively covered some 20,000 miles. The final film, *Somewhere to Disappear* will have its debut screening on the opening day of the *From Here to There: Alec Soth’s America*. Screening time is at 12:00 pm on Sunday September 12th in the Walker’s cinema.

<5> On her Facebook page in January 2010, photographer and art blogger Amy Stein called for more rigorous criteria for determining the “emerging photographer” status of an artist. A slew of comments followed, including one from *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz, who wrote, “I do not think that the word ‘emerging’ is the problem; it merely denotes a phase of one’s exhibiting career. I think that the lurking problematic term is, ah, ‘photographer!’” For an accounting of the exchanges and a continuation of the debate, see Harlan Erskine’s blog post on the subject.

<6> *From Here to There* is a small spiral-bound book published by the artist that provided “exhibition notes”—effectively, short narratives accompanying individual thumbprint photographs—made to complement *Portraits (From Here to There)*, Soth’s portion of the McKnight Fellows exhibition in September 2000 at the Katherine Nash Gallery (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis). These fellowships are financial awards made on an annual basis by the Minnesota-based McKnight Foundation, which has supported individual artists in the state with grants since 1982.

<7> The original text by Shore, accompanying some forty photographic plates, was published in *Uncommon Places* (New York: Aperture, 1982). The text is reprinted in *Stephen Shore: Photographs 1973–1993* (London: Schirmer Art Books, 2004), 35.

<8> William Eggleston, *The Democratic Forest* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

<9> Soth was one of six artists included in the exhibition *Portraiture Now: Feature Photography* at the National Portrait Gallery (Washington, D.C.) in December 2008. The other artists were Katy Grannan, Jocelyn Lee, Ryan McGinley, Steve Pyke, and Martin Schoeller.

<10> Garry Winogrand, *Women are Beautiful* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). See also Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1975): 6–18.

<11> See note 6.

<12> To read the text of Frank's 1954 Guggenheim Fellowship application, see Sarah Greenough, *Looking In: Robert Frank's "The Americans,"* exp. ed. (Washington, D.C./Göttingen: National Gallery of Art/Steidl, 2009), 362.

All images courtesy the artist.

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