



RUN AWAY WITH ALEC SOTH

By

Published February 2, 2012





Alec Soth spent five years seeking out men who were hiding from the world, and tonight he shows the results at his first show at Sean Kelly Gallery. The legendary Minneapolis-based photographer of Americana returns to New York to show “Broken Manual,” previously shown at the Walker Center among other locations, and in a special-edition book.)

Interview spoke with Soth in his rented loft. He was thrilled to be finally showing this emblematic body of work, but also happy to move on.

ADAM O'REILLY: How did the show installation of the show at Sean Kelly go?

ALEC SOTH: It went magically wonderfully well, it went fast, I have to go there to day and finish things up, but it was bizarrely fast. You know, I was pretty stressed out about this show for some reason. I don't know why, but it just worked out.

O'REILLY: The "Broken Manual" project ended in 2010 and *Somewhere To Disappear*, a subsequent film, came out last year; how does it feel to revisit the work?

SOTH: That's partly some of my anxiety, is going back to this work. I felt it was unfinished business. It is true to the spirit of the work itself, which is sort of about hiding and want to run away; the project really never came our properly. The book still doesn't exactly exist; we can talk about that in a second. [*laughs*]

When I signed up with Sean Kelly, there was this question, do we show new work or show "Broken Manual." This show is work that I invested my heart and soul into, and it never had that moment, so now it has it and it's great. At the same time it's also... dark work, it comes from a difficult place and time in the making of it.

O'REILLY: Was it a difficult time in your life, too?

SOTH: Yes it was, and I really fell into that dark space. You know, if you had of talked to me two days ago, I would have been a mess. *[laughs]*

O'REILLY: What was the initial attraction to the men in the project?

SOTH: The High Museum commissioned me to work in the South, so I was working in Atlanta, and wasn't interested in Atlanta, and then I remembered the Olympic bomber, Eric Rudolph. I poked around where he had been living and hiding out while the FBI was looking for him. I wasn't so interested in the politics of it, it was more the fantasy of the man on the run, something I have always been attracted, the fugitive, that kind of story. I ended up in Northern Georgia and I went this tiny little monastery with four or five guys there, it got me thinking about how I wanted to get at that desire to run away, without it being a documentary essay on a specific ideology, outside of the documentary tradition.

O'REILLY: The work really evidences your empathy for the men you photograph. It almost feels like you were more participant than voyeur.

SOTH: Oh, absolutely, yes. There is this cheesy men's-group quality to the work. Do you remember Robert Bly and this whole men's movement in the 1980s? He is a Minnesota poet, he had this best selling book, *Iron John*, and there something so corny about that, white guys sitting in a circle pounding drums. There is an element to that in the work, but also there is an empathy that I had, but also there was a criticism of it, and of myself as much as anyone. The people I portray, you get really very little information from them out of my work, the movie that came out is a different story, you get more information.

O'REILLY: So let's go back to the book for this project not existing—I had seen it listed on Amazon, but hadn't seen it in stores?

SOTH: One of thing I have learned is that you can't believe what you see on Amazon, just because you order it, doesn't mean it will come. [*laughs*]

300 copies of it exist. It was a really special project for me and I wanted the special edition to come out first. We made a book safe, cut out the pages of these books we bought, and you can hide this Broke Manual in the larger book. It was a huge ordeal to cut them out, and we made those, they exist, but the trade edition never came out.

O'REILLY: Why are books such an important vessel for your photos?

SOTH: I'm a project-based photographer; I think in narrative terms, the way a writer thinks of a book, or a filmmaker a film. The thing about a book is that you can control the entire shape of it, unlike an exhibition where the parameters always change; you might have three rooms in one and one room in the next.

O'REILLY: Do you know the text, "How To Disappear in America," either the anonymous version on the internet or Seth Price's?

SOTH: [*laughs*] It's a funny turn of events, there was a time, years ago, when that was essentially title and when I saw the Seth Price book, I was like, "Oh, great." In the exhibition, there is a lot of my research pinned on the wall, some portions form that text and some other how-to run away manuals, survivalist literature. I was really inspired that kind of writing.

O'REILLY: How was it having a film crew there with you filming the documentary during the project?

SOTH: The filmmakers, Laure Flammarion & Arnaud Uyttenhove, added something really valuable, I could be more fragmentary with my photography because they were picking up the narrative slack. It's entirely their film, I had no say in any of it. I knew they were getting all of this material—say I meet a really fascinating character, I could just use a picture the interior of their house and not show the person, but I knew that they got that on film. I found that quite liberating.

O'REILLY: Was it hard having them there with you on this, seemingly, solo journey?

SOTH: There is something sort of contradictory to the spirit of the whole project to have a film crew with me. It's about being alone, [so] why would I have filmmakers with me—that is something I struggled with initially. The work is really about the failure to be alone. The people that I photographed allowed me to photograph them because they didn't want to be alone, and the truth is I didn't want to be alone making the pictures, I wanted the company of the filmmakers. Nobody really wants to be alone. People need people.

"BROKEN MANUAL" IS ON VIEW AT [SEAN KELLY GALLERY](#) THROUGH MARCH 11.