

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

February 26, 2007

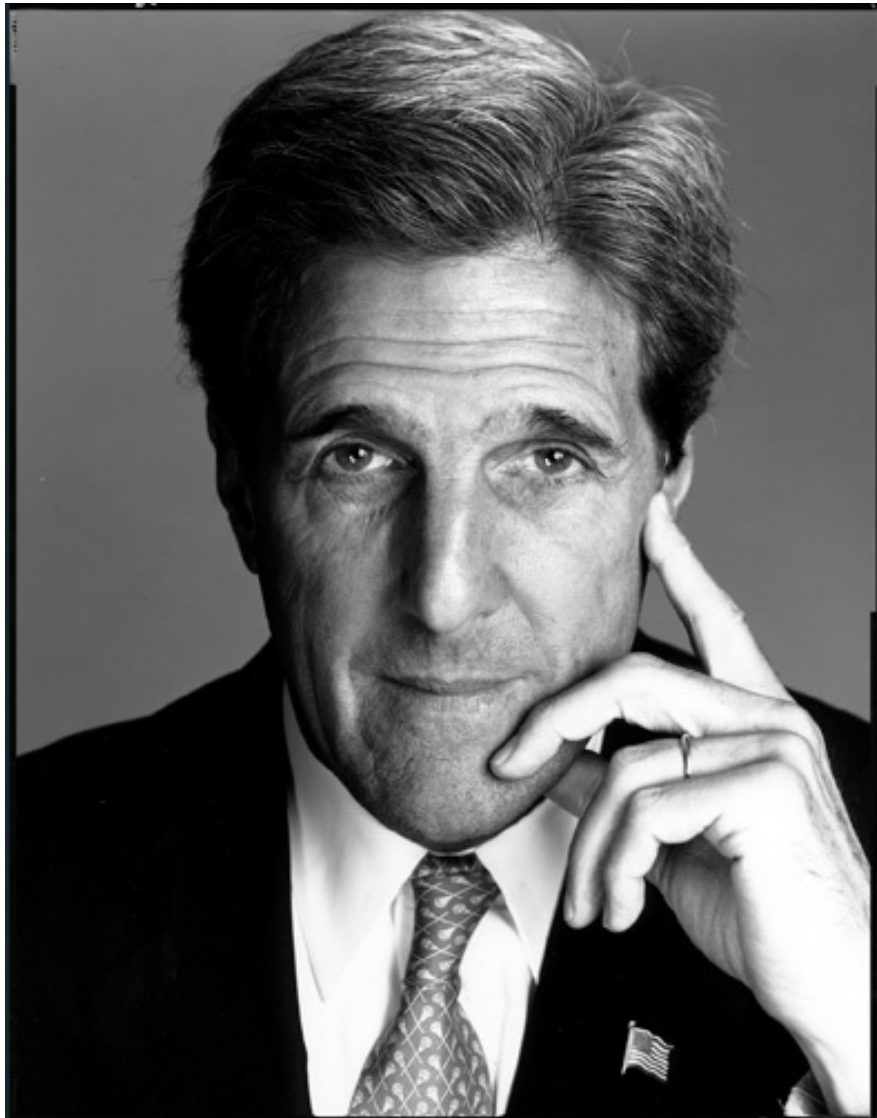
gun for hire

Filed under: [editorial photo](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:50 am

Several years ago I got talked into a job photographing a number of European telecommunications CEO's. The pictures were some of the worst I've ever taken. Each subject had mastered the stale but stately CEO look. One man walked into the room, shook my hand, and held up two fingers. "Two pictures," he insisted, "no more."

I've since instituted the 'No-CEO' policy. I'm not interested in photographing powerful people whose only interest is to appear powerful. There are plenty of other photographers who can do a better job.

The best of all time was Avedon. He was notorious for being able to crack the façade. But even Avedon would sometimes fail:



Last month I photographed in Paris for the 2007 edition of Magnum's [Fashion Magazine](#). I broke my No-CEO policy a couple of times, but I'm happy with the pictures. The biggest challenge I faced was photographing models. I tried to make real portraits by photographing the models in their own clothes and apartments. But it seemed impossible to break through their model-ness. No matter how many times I told a model to stop posing, they still had the look. Even their eyes were professional.

This brings up the whole issue of artists doing editorial photography. In the last week I've encountered a few examples:

- Chris Verene in [last week's issue](#) of Newsweek
- Stephen Gill in [yesterday's NYTimes Style](#) Magazine
- Justine Kurland [photographing Jeff Wall](#) for the NYTimes Magazine.

The Kurland pictures really got me thinking. In the same edition of the NYTimes, her work received a [full-page profile](#). If the tables were turned, would Jeff Wall take editorial pictures of Kurland? Not in a million years.

So why does she bother? Years ago I asked this question to Robert Polidori. He told me that he used to play in a rock band. He said that editorial photography is similar to going on the road with a band. You find yourself playing an empty bar in the middle of nowhere on a Tuesday night and ask yourself, "Why do I bother." The answer, he said, is that all of these gigs make you stronger – more ready for the studio or the arena concert.

31 Comments

1. As a musician/songwriter who has played many of those Tuesday night "why do I bother" shows. I have to agree that it truly does come down to getting stronger and just doing it for those few folks that are there to share in the experience. I've met some incredible people in these odd circumstances. As a performer I've often had the most intense/genuine performances for tiny crowds. Every bit of work does matter... does sharpen the blade. P.S. I thought (along with others I suppose) that the W. Whitman poem was an eternal send off. Glad that it wasn't. I've enjoyed this blog for months, but understand the work & time it takes. It inspired me to relaunch my website as a wordpress blog and try to engage others in a dialogue. All the best, Al James

Comment by [Al James](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [2:32 am](#)

2. "Why bother?" Perhaps she needs the money? Jeff Wall is in a position to market (or "leverage", as I think the businessfolk say) his single-mindedness, because he can afford to.

I read the Jeff Wall article with interest — I dunno, there's something deeply troubling about photography staged to resemble reality, that sells for a million dollars on the back of conceptual concerns with reality and representation. Isn't this just "genre painting"? And wasn't genre painting the Big Problem with C19 academy art?? Wall can dress it up with whatever theory he likes, but I cannot see how artists can square milking the Conceptual Cash Cow with the political/philosophical beefs (bad pun, sorry) with reality, capitalism, etc. that underpin the theory. "You have to forget about the idea of the spirit of the place," he says. "It's one of the big, consoling myths of people who live nowhere." Thanks, Jeff, I'll do that.

You talk of "cracking the facade", Alec — are you sure you haven't fallen for another big, consoling myth, there? If I understand Mr. Wall, a good actor, or someone hired off a street corner, could probably do you a much better job as "a model whose facade has just cracked under the penetrating gaze of the artist" ...

Harumph. Feeling cynical today.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [6:50 am](#)

3. So editorial photographers are not 'artists'? because a photograph was commissioned or it has an application beyond wall decoration does not necessarily remove it from the arena of art. In recent years the art world has somewhat retrospectively adopted photography including those who were once considered editorial or even reportage photographers such as Simon Norfolk or Luc Delahaye. I tend to think that people like Jeff Wall and Avedon, whilst brilliant, are just photographers like the rest of us.

Comment by [Nick Turpin](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [6:59 am](#)

4. You know, as little as I care about what is contained in the "Style" section, I'd rather see Stephen Gill do work there than any of the usual people. I find most editorial photography boring and predictable and not interesting beyond belief, so it's good to see someone else having a go at it.

The Hollywood actors magazine from a few weeks ago was another good example for this. In my humble opinion, Katy Grannan's work was worlds away from the usual editorial stuff (and from many, but not all, the other photographers in the same spread), and it was utterly brilliant.

It seems to me that editorial photography is orbiting around a fixed set of photographic cliches (like putting someone's hand under the chin, "thinker pose" style, like in the Avedon photo [even though that's really just a particularly bad and particularly obvious example]), and I appreciate anyone not following that.

Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [7:15 am](#)

5. I think anyone who can break through the usual editorial/portrait template is worth showing – but we can all disagree on who that is. I thought the Rineke Dijkstra portrait of Cate Blanchett was the outstanding work in the hollywood spread (and one of the Katy Grannan – but not all) – but most of the work showed very little that we hadn't already seen a million times.

The question is do we like something because it shows us an element of a person or place beyond what is simply portrayed or do we like it because it is something new, something based on a style or gimmick. For example, I don't think Dijkstra has a gimmick. She captures something inside a person and she breaks through the facade in a way that almost nobody else can do. I don't think she 'cracks the facade' – but she gets behind it somehow. And that somehow is the big mystery and what makes photography so wonderful and great.

Someone like Stephen Gill, bless him, I'm not so sure. He might make some interesting pictures but how soon will it be before his scattering of flowers over a photograph becomes a little tired. In the same way that his pictures of people in high visibility jackets really quickly became tired – a load of pictures of people in high visibility jackets – and nothing more.

Comment by colin — February 26, 2007 @ [7:31 am](#)

6. While I've always been aware of artists and their affliction with OCD, I never have actually understood the importance of leaving a mental health problem untreated. If Wall had not become such a "valuable" artist, would photographing twenty men standing on street corner every day for three weeks be lauded as a product of an exquisitely sharp mind?

While I do very much appreciate the ground that Wall broke (could we have the genius of Greg Crewdson without Jeff Wall?) and do admire many of his images ("The Eviction" rocks) – I have trouble with his disdain for the hunters and gatherers. I wonder how Mr Wall would respond to the t-shirt I plan to wear to MOMA next week: "If you can't make it good, make it big."

ps. Does anyone know where I can get a few giant light boxes?

Comment by [Russell Kaye](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [9:05 am](#)

7. The article with Wall was fascinating – I didn't know the obsessional lengths he goes to to produce a single image. It's a fine line indeed between admirable single-mindedness and complete dementia. Personally, I started photography alongside painting because of the arbitrary beauty of what I see around me – the idea of painstakingly recreating that reality seems somewhat redundant.

As for Alec's models, isn't everyone so media and photo aware today that there can be no such thing as an visually 'innocent' subject? Like the participants in reality TV, everyone today seems to mediate their lives and feelings through some kind of imagined lens.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [9:18 am](#)

8. Did anybody notice how there were pictures by Kurland and Dan Winters in the Wall piece? Did one of them not get the picture the Times wanted so the other was sent in? I thought that was odd. I suspect that Winters was the reinforcement, Kurland's portrait of Wall and his wife was pretty weak.

Comment by Horton — February 26, 2007 @ [10:39 am](#)

9. In the scheme of things, few of us photographers even have the opportunity to say "no CEOs" unless one of them is our dad or something....but perhaps we have shot a wedding or two...or something totally orchestrated by a "customer" of our implied "style" of seeing. The gun for hire is always that....hired. There are assumptions on that side of the fence that process and distill a particular artist's way of seeing into some sort of sausage casing, simplified and palatable. Working under the pressure of these kinds of expectations poisons the waters, although it seems almost a necessary rite of passage into the world of professional acknowledgement. Jergen Teller

does Cindy Sherman doing Marc Jacobs doing something that hippies fished out of salvation army bins in the 60's for loose change.

Comment by Peggy N — February 26, 2007 @ [11:04 am](#)

10. A example of personal style is Antonin kratochvil 's book Incognito. you see more the photographers 'opinion than the sitter. Another example is Close up of A former Annie Leibovitz assistant Martin Schoeller.

Comment by jesus — February 26, 2007 @ [11:20 am](#)

11. Fashion Magazine is fun. I thought Bruce Gilden's issue last year was a riot. I hope you're doing a full issue.

Personally, I'm rarely entertained or informed by art photographers shooting editorial, very often it appears conceited. But then photography is a conceit, no? Rather, I am a fan of many career editorial photographers, eg in the UK I scour the guardian/observer for eamonn mccabe and dan chung shots, always elegant, thoughtful, earnest, and considerate.

Comment by rob — February 26, 2007 @ [11:59 am](#)

12. Kurland's obviously in a different place career-wise than Wall is, but I think there's more to it than that.

Most artists I've encountered are delighted to make work and to have their work seen. If they can actually get paid to make work and have it seen? Nirvana. She's not shooting a headshot for a corporate extranet or some annual report – she's shooting a legendary artist for a publication which has a reputation for featuring great photographers.

I've had some amazing photographers show in my gallery, and a lot of people have said to me how did you get that person? And the answer is: I just asked. I actually have never once been told no by a photographer – Andres Serrano curated a show for me, Mitch Epstein has had work at my gallery a couple of times, Stephen Shore, etc. They were happy to have their work seen, and I think that the novelty at showing at some upstart downtown gallery had its own charm as well.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [1:08 pm](#)

13. mike c. hit the nail on the head – why bother? money money money money, money. after that, you can justify a million reasons why to do CEO headshots, but please let's not call it more than it is – a day job. and yes, when people do high-level, big exposure client-based work, their 'street cred' is damaged. katy grannan is an amazing portrait photographer, but the fact that she is kind of a celebrity photographer also removes a bit of the shine from the apple. do what you gotta do to put bread on the table, but don't polish a turd and try to call it a diamond.

of course, all photographers would love the chance to accept or reject big commissions, but unless you shoot them the way that Freidlander or Eggleston or Robert Frank shoot their commissions, as if there was no commission, then the artist in them should at least be willing to admit that it is the business-person who is making the portrait. be happy and accept it, people would literally kill to be in that position.

Comment by john k. — February 26, 2007 @ [1:57 pm](#)

14. if anyone had a chance to read a Rolling Stone interview with Bob Dylan from several years ago you'll remember these words...some of the best as it relates to any photo/music thread. not verbatim, but what he said can best be summed up as the fact that it's not the destination but the voyage. he does it every night because the "doing of it" is where the power and the magic lies.

by the way, in case you haven't yet read it, go buy 'REFRACTIONS' by Ralph Gibson, Steidl/MEP. read the passage on music and photography...then let's talk. such an articulate, masterful take on why so many great photographs sound so good.

Comment by [Max Hirshfeld](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [4:17 pm](#)

15. I used to do lots of TV commercials on the side while doing movie work. Both were paying gigs, sure. But the movie people often looked with disdain on the TV commercial stuff, that it was somehow "impure." I always looked at it as an opportunity to work for four or six weeks on something that could be a real departure from the "regular" projects, which typically took from one to three years apiece. For someone who works in one mode for a particular audience with their own narrow set of expectations (i.e., the "important gallery" audience), why not have the opportunity to do something different?

Comment by [Kevin Bjorke](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [5:07 pm](#)

16. I thought Lubow's article was strangely similar to Wall's work – I was interested in it, read it carefully and closely, but I still couldn't decide whether I liked or agreed with it. Something nebulous about the arguments it makes – not that they are incomplete, but that they seem to run along the edge of being indeterminate. I think Wall's photos are similarly nebulous. At least, I always come away from one of his shows scratching my head, not really sure whether I am bothered by the work, intrigued, challenged, like, dislike or if the works reside somewhere at the nexus of all of those things. And then I wonder whether residing at the nexus of all those reactions is good, bad, etc. Or whether I need to switch to a dandruff shampoo.

I think the idea of layers to a subject fits the early paragraph in Lubow's article in which he suggests that photographers like Friedlander, Evans and Arbus thought of their work in terms of stalking, shooting and bagging images. However, I wonder if the layers that are broken through in these photographers' works reside as much or more/entirely in the viewer as/than they do in the subject – the image becoming a scalpel that flays the viewer's preconceptions or defenses against the image's power. So rather than finding a look in their subject which reveals a truer deeper meaning about the subject, they are finding a look in the subject which allows the image more direct and deeper access to the viewer. The camera as theater spot rather than Freud's psychoanalytic cigar.

Comment by [J Ake](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [5:10 pm](#)

17. I generally find your posts provocative but I am disappointed by your No CEO stance. Sure it is hard to be stuck with "photographing powerful people whose only interest is to appear powerful."

But it seems like at that moment before we start shooting, we have four choices: give up, as you did; shoot something boring and move on; go so over-the-top in showing their stodginess that you reveal them for who they are; or get them to collaborate with you on your own (or jointly developed) ideas of how to shoot it.

I've had similar difficulties shooting portraits of some administrators and faculty in my university photographer job. Sometimes I tell them, "let's try my idea and if you're not happy we can do it again."

Giving myself and my subject the permission to fail has made us both take risks we'd otherwise avoid. Here's one example of a straightforward/risky pairing that comes to mind: <http://photos.news.wisc.edu/results.php?id=6216%2C3998>. In our case, in university publications, both get used.

An even better example of this is the shrink-wrapped exec. Someone talked the CEO of a shipping company into being wrapped in plastic for their annual report cover. Best damn exec portrait I've seen, wish I could remember who shot it.

Comment by [MFR \(Michael Forster Rothbart\)](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [7:21 pm](#)

18. MFR – it seems like there are more options than those four, and it doesn't seem to me like Alec gave up at all. he did his job and made a decision that from now on, it was a job better left to others who didn't find it so boring or frustrating or unfulfilling. but don't make it sound like shooting a CEO portrait is a great opportunity for great photos. there is only one Avedon, and his portraits of the world's most powerful figures were great art. i've never seen anyone other than him, though, produce significant photos from such a situation. i think Avedon NEEDED to be faced up against these great and powerful figures, and he is the only one i've seen that still was able to get what HE wanted, and not what the subject wanted.

i think Alec's stance is an admirable one – leave these kinds of pictures to the people who HAVE TO do it to survive, or those who have a clear artistic vision that coincides with the commission.

Comment by john k. — February 26, 2007 @ [7:45 pm](#)

19. I was thinking about the shame and dignity of working for The Man earlier today. I figure it's a mixed bag and you should just make the best of it.

Comment by aizan — February 26, 2007 @ [8:03 pm](#)

20. This takes me back to the days when I was assistant to John Claridge in the early 1990's. We traveled to the US to shoot pictures of many of the top CEOs of the day, including John Sculley at Apple, Lee Iacocca at Chrysler, David Kearns at Xerox and many others... It was pretty amazing to meet these guys, and also to see how each of them reacted to being photographed... most surprising was how relaxed and easy going most of these captains of industry were. That was certainly a great experience for me, I'm very pleased there was no 'No CEO' rule for us... Also, I couldn't help smile at JM Colbergs post, regarding the hand to chin pose. I've just spent quite a bit of time deliberately shooting that very pose...

<http://www.davegreenwood.com/weblog/2007/02/27/sometimes-i-wonder/>

Cheers.

Dave.

Comment by [Dave Greenwood](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [8:17 pm](#)

21. "The Kurland pictures really got me thinking. In the same edition of the NYTimes, her work received a full-page profile. If the tables were turned, would Jeff Wall take editorial pictures of Kurland? Not in a million years."

Alec, I think you are thinking about that whole situation all wrong.

I don't mean that you aren't right about it, but I think what you are failing to see is simple, money situation or not, at the end of the day it comes down to what you LIKE to do.

Photography has a way of being so generalized, especially now.

I'm not trying to separate what's art and what's not here.

But certainly there is a huge difference between editorial photography and setting up shots. I think a lot of people misunderstand this. Why does it always have to be that photographers who only set up shots get looked at as thinking better of themselves than editorial photographers or documentary photographers? Can't it just be what you like to do with photography?

I know personally, I don't like to do editorial work, it's not that I think any less of it, I just simply don't enjoy doing it, it's NOT an empty bar show to me, how could it be? It's completely different! In a barroom with three people watching or in a basement or in a giant venue you are still playing your music. The music you've made and you love. Editorial photography isn't my music, maybe it isn't Jeff's either. Infact, I work two jobs on top of making my artwork simply because that's how much it is not my music...

...Ahh then again maybe someday I will give up and give in to the man.

PS: When I was in a band, I was spazzing like a five year old where ever it was we played, I think our bloodiest show was in a house in the woods with two kids watching us and 60 people outside not paying attention waiting for the bigger bands to go on.

Comment by Chad Muthard — February 26, 2007 @ [9:10 pm](#)

22. Ha, Ya know what I think there was alot of condescension in that last comment but I hope you read between the lines there.

Comment by Chad Muthard — February 26, 2007 @ [9:41 pm](#)

23. Ha, wait one more time, condescension was the wrong word there, what I meant to say was that alot of what I said may have appeared to jump back and forth...yup, i bet some would find this a bit embarassing..

Comment by Chad Muthard — February 26, 2007 @ [9:45 pm](#)

24. Alec, how did you choose the keepers from your recent "model portrait" photos? Did you base the decision on the expressions or body positions of the models or on other factors? I often think about the intangibles involved in portraiture and how imperceptible differences in facial expressions can render a face impenetrable as opposed to open, but impassive.

(What about the 'i's in that sentence! That might be the greatest sentence I've ever written!)

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [11:02 pm](#)

25. Also, I love Alec Soth. I'm glad to hear that you're back home.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [11:04 pm](#)

26. Zoe, I'm battling with those decisions as we speak. If I had half the guts of Ms. Strauss, I'd post em' online and get some feedback. This is why I love Zoe (and loath thyself).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [11:44 pm](#)

27. Should artist do editorial work? I would say yes if they have to/want to. But only if the commissioner respects the integrity of the work and is prepared to let the artist do what the artist does best. After all isn't that why they were commissioned in the first place? I think a more common problem here is that sometimes artist conform to a notion they have about editorial work. The result is something with no distinct visual identity. I find this to be the case with the Stephen Gill picture. Where is all the dead pan irony? In this instance I would agree- 'why bother'.

Comment by [Paul Reas](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [3:35 am](#)

28. For thoughts from Avedon himself on photographing Kissinger see <http://www.richardavedon.com/conversation/kissinger.php>

Comment by [David](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [9:12 am](#)

29. [...] If you somehow missed the Jeff Wall discussion, see dispatches, Alec Soth, and The Landscapist. [...]

Pingback by [Joe Reifer - Words » Blog Archive » Bits and pieces](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [12:25 pm](#)

30. A. I'm eager to see your choices, Alec. I can imagine that this is a difficult editing process.

B. Don't be fooled, Alec, I get feedback but I don't listen to anyone except myself.

C. You are insane to "loath thyself." You are superb.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — February 27, 2007 @ [7:52 pm](#)

31. Regardless of which box (art, editorial) to put the work in...what are the 'qualities' of a good photograph?

Content, form, line, light, composition, no longer seem to be the key ingredients.

Or is it all just opinion, "like A h...s, everyone has one".

Hand under the chin is in, hand under the chin is out.

Not being snarkey...just curious.

En-"lighten" me.

Comment by Frank — March 1, 2007 @ [6:59 am](#)