

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 7, 2006

## Q: Why Magnum? A: Christopher Anderson

Filed under: [artists](#), [Magnum](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:43 am

I'm often asked why, as a fine-art photographer, I would want to be part of [Magnum Photos](#). In my application letter to associate membership of Magnum, I tried to answer this question by writing:

"I don't trust art world success. If you look at a twenty-year-old catalogue of the Whitney Biennial, you don't recognize many names. Moreover, much of the work looks empty, dated and self-indulgent. The truth is that I'm prone to self-indulgence. I could easily see myself holing up in Nova Scotia scribbling hermetic diary notes on old pictures and thinking it is great art. This is the reason I applied to Magnum."

What unites Magnum photographers is that they go out into the world to make pictures. In twenty years, much fine art photography will be as relevant as [this](#). I suppose a lot of people no longer think Magnum is relevant either. But I disagree. While there aren't many magazine venues for this kind of photography, the work itself is still important. There are a bunch of younger photographers at Magnum making fantastic pictures. And much of this work will stand the test of time. For example, take a look at [Christopher Anderson](#). His pictures aren't just important – they're good. Not only does he do terrific work in hotspots all over the world – he is really good at photographing Republicans:



© Christopher Anderson



© Christopher Anderson



© Christopher Anderson

Along with great young photographers, there are also young people in the Magnum offices creating new venues like [Magnum in Motion](#). Have a look at Christopher's outstanding interactive essay on [Lebanon](#).

The artworld can seem [pretty shallow](#) sometimes. I have admiration for working photographers.

Photojournalists get a lot of criticism, but they really are brave and sometimes even heroic. Look at this picture of Christopher Anderson carrying an elderly woman through the rubble of Aitaroun, Lebanon (A related article can be read at [PDN online](#)):



© AP Photo / Hussein Malla

That said, I'm very aware of the fact that I'm not a photojournalist. The art world is my terrain. I haven't carried anybody through rubble lately. I'm just happy to rub elbows with these folks from time to time.

## 20 Comments

1. A moving shot of Anderson, Alec. I'm impressed by his work and by yours, and a big fan of Magnum. I'd describe your own work like the litotes used by many friends of mine in Minnesota. Fact of the day: litotes, statements that affirm something by denying its opposite, i.e., "he isn't such a bad cook," originated in "Beowulf," the Scandinavian epic translated into English. No surprise that often, my Minnesota friends speak that way, given the fact that many immigrants to Minnesota were originally Nordic...

*Comment by dagata — September 7, 2006 @ [2:08 pm](#)*

2. Great term, never heard it before. It is definitely part of talking Minnesotan. Sort of like 'It could be worse' or 'Not too bad.' Too much enthusiasm is a dangerous thing.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [2:15 pm](#)*

3. Photography automatically puts one in the role of passive observer. A desire for involvement and relevance makes sense.

*Comment by steph — September 7, 2006 @ [2:40 pm](#)*

4. Alec..  
Nice blog..love your work..it's great to see a successful artist doing some writing, and opening up to the public through the web.

Hmmm... "empty, dated and self-indulgent..." sounds like something I'd say about many a NYC Chelsea Art Gallery!

I look forward to reading more!  
Wish you all the best.  
-Mike

*Comment by [Mike](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [3:25 pm](#)*

5. Couldn't agree more. You can't trust the Art market, just like you can't trust any market, or democracy for that matter... The only thing you can trust is Magnum to support a great number of great photographers. Don't think there is a more interesting stock library in the world!

*Comment by [Svein-Frode](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [5:02 pm](#)*

6. Hi Alec,

I loved your Mississippi project and agree with you about the lifespan of some Whitney artists. But, would you stick with the fine art projects even if they had no chance of ever being successful in the "art world?" Would you do it just for yourself? I could make the case that's one of the differences between fine artist and professional photographer.

- Shannon

*Comment by [Shannon Ayres](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [6:05 pm](#)*

7. I did plenty of work before I had an audience (besides my wife and parents). But I would be lying if I said that deep down I didn't long to have people look at the work. Perhaps the 'professional' just demands an audience more quickly. Hard to say. I really think all of these lines are blurred. At least they are for me.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [9:16 pm](#)*

8. Thanks for the nice comments Mike. I'm a regular reader of MAO  
– <http://www.modernartobsession.com/>. One of the reasons I started a blog was because I get so bored of static never-updated websites like <http://www.alecsoth.com>

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 7, 2006 @ [9:28 pm](#)*

9. what a treat to discovery your blog. your work is terrific and much appreciated.

have despaired all week at cbs news with katie couric and suri as the number 2 story. annie what contrived tripe. chris anderson's work is such a powerful medicine in response to all of it.

what if they held a war and no one photographed it.....or the bodies that came home in boxes put quickly into the ground with no record.....it would go on forever. and so chris anderson a toast to you for sharing your brave travels.

thanks to both of you for your art

*Comment by [a maclennan](#) — September 8, 2006 @ [1:51 am](#)*

10. Mr. Soth,

Very nice blog sir. I am glad to see that you are espousing some of the great ideas that you have been kind enough to share with me over the years. Although I think your treatment of Todd Walker, while justifiably harsh, is a bit mean (HA).

Best,  
Justin

*Comment by [Justin](#) — September 8, 2006 @ [10:26 am](#)*

11. I've become very disillusioned with contemporary "ART" which I feel has been hijacked by the media/advertising/marketing complex and trivialised by curators who have mastered the art of saying profoundly pretentious phrases from a thin volume. I'm so sick of hearing about photographers who "document" this and "explore" that (meaning they took a bunch of images, selected several and made a show.

I've always liked the definition of art in a Bruce Naumann neon sculpture I often visited at Basel's Kunstmuseum... "The purpose of art is to reveal the mystic truths"

Perhaps there are just too many of us practicing, ummm, shall I call it serious photography, but (and I include my own work in this) the same themes and memes show up in work after work. I call it "me too" art... Sometimes I'm jealous of the photographers of the 30's through the 60's as they were inventing the genre that most of us refine. To my way of thinking the current Magnum people fall into the same trap. It's professional stuff to be sure, but most of it seems very "me too-ish."

The most interesting photographic work I've personally seen in the past 2 years is Robert Frank's more recent work, as he uses his old photographs and snippets of text to explore his scarred psychological landscape and his struggle as an old man to make sense of his failures with his kids and his parents. Maybe because it seems like an honest attempt to find hidden truths and doesn't (I'd like to believe) have one eye to an audience.

I understand what you mean about Christopher Anderson's courage in risking his well being to help someone in distress while practicing his trade. It's a sad commentary on press photography that this is noteworthy.

In my experience walking around with a camera is easy (if a bit tiring when you do it hours on end), constructing a good photograph takes practice and a good eye, creating an eye catching

photograph takes some talent and experience and a bit of luck/good fortune and a bit of personal style but creating ART (to me at least) means all of the above and something more... you have to have something to reveal... Edward Hopper did that and more than a few Hopper "me toos" are quite popular photographers today.

I'm pleased that you've chosen to start blogging. Maybe if more serious photographers engage their audiences directly we can escape from the tyranny of the "art scene" and spur each other on to deeper and more exciting work.

*Comment by [Eric Perlberg](#) — September 8, 2006 @ [1:35 pm](#)*

12. i feel a lot like you, eric. "me too" is a great way to put it. but there are some magnum photographers that i like: josef koudelka, gilles peress, lise sarfati, gueorgui pinkhassov, and alec soth, of course.

*Comment by [aizan](#) — September 10, 2006 @ [6:13 pm](#)*

13. I've really enjoyed looking at your work and am enjoying your blog. However (has to be a BUT somewhere) I'd like to make a counter argument – my personal views are probably somewhere in the middle between what I'm going to write and yours. Ever since the shock of Vietnam, photojournalism has slowly been brought under control and now has the same effect as any other kind of marketing. Whilst not doubting the high skill level and personal integrity of Magnum shooters ( I wish I could be half as good), we are so surrounded by images of disaster and war that they have little effect. Modern conflicts have the photographer 'embedded'. Everyone now knows the effects of war on civilians, but does that make governments and their populations less keen on waging war? The recent slaughter in Palestine has passed with populations largely silent despite excellent work from photographers risking their lives to show people what was going on. Viewing the Magnum 'Greatest Hits' exhibit in London about 5 years ago ( I ended up seeing it 5 days in a row, so awed was I by it) after being literally struck dumb by the photography, I was left with a deep sadness and sense of futility. Seeing so much of this work, I found that the specifics of the situation of each image made no impact – the place, the cause, – and I was left with seeing the exhibit largely as an extended essay on horror (those sections of a more social documentary excluded). And with the context taken away, the thrust of the images was weakened. Photojournalism IMO depends for its integrity on the situation. I've never been so sickened as when I saw the Salgado 'Children' exhibit – huge Fine Art BW prints of children probably dead – the use of beauty as pornography. Art, on the other hand, is not making a claim to a specific situation but is appealing to a universal and is therefore better placed to make a connection, in much the same way as poetry can get to the core of things better than other literary forms. The counter argument to all I've written I guess is that in light of all of the above – the Magnum ethic is even more important and without it, we would know even less...

*Comment by [Julian](#) — September 12, 2006 @ [4:49 am](#)*

14. Great post Julian. Pictures often feel inadequate. I think most Frontline documentaries are more powerful than a thousand pictures. Your point about poetry is well taken. But my tendency, and the tendency of a lot of poetry, is to become hermetic. For example, the 'Language Poets' begin to just speak gibberish. I think it is more meaningful to find that place between the personal and the social. But this is murky ethical terrain. One doesn't want to use dead babies like daubs of paint. It is complex and hard to find the right balance. But maybe that is the price of being engaged in something meaningful?

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 12, 2006 @ [7:15 am](#)*

15. I think the constant struggle to define the line is where the fun is. On poetry, have you read 'Saturday' by Ian McEwan? Lovely utopian climax where a would-be rapist is dissuaded by the recitation of a poem... I love happy endings!

Comment by [Julian](#) — September 12, 2006 @ [7:28 am](#)

16. Great blog Alec, and like Justin I think it's great that you're putting yourself out there (out here?) and writing. I also think that reading Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* offers worthwhile suggestions for how to deal w/: 1. The abundance of tough-to-view photojournalism and 2. The existential pitfalls the overly educated fall into after viewing it.

Check it out- it's short!

Comment by [Michael](#) — September 21, 2006 @ [4:42 pm](#)

17. Alec,

People ask you why "as a fine art photographer" you would want to be a part of magnum. I read an interesting piece by a national geographic editor that kind of sums it up. here is an excerpt:

"How do I develop a photographic style?

Style comes with time and is a difficult thing to force. The tendency at first is to copy a well-known photographer (witness how many young photographers are trying to shoot like Eugene Richards or Mary Ellen Mark), but you must move beyond emulation and develop your own strengths. Be aware of the literal nature of your images and strive to go beyond them in an aesthetic sense, but avoid mere self-indulgence."

(<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/qanda/index.html>)

The notion of Style is for a different debate, the point is that the collective you are in represents individuality and shared purpose. It represents the idea that idiosyncracies are of benefit to photojournalism and documentary rather than being detrimental to it. That is important i think.

cheers

ross mcdonnell

Comment by [Ross](#) — October 6, 2006 @ [7:34 am](#)

18. This is a powerful Blog, and not to mention your images. i have been admiring your photographs for mor than 3 years and amazed i have always been. i reacently saw some of you work in Berlin and was wondering if you would be interested in to coming to Mexcio to show your work, or do a project. It seems to me that my country needs a push up in contemporary photography, and i think you could be a grate participant in this movement.

thank your time.

Pablo Prieto E.  
(sherpa)

Comment by [Pablo Prieto](#) — October 6, 2006 @ [10:44 am](#)

19. I saw Chris speak last night in Toronto. The lecture hall was packed. I was part of a group from Loyalist College - where Canada has its only 'real' photojournalism post-secondary education program. We went on a 'field trip' to see the World Press Photo exhibition (where Chris has winning pictures included) and then to see the lecture.

The problem with Canadian post-secondary education in photojournalism is that it seems quite 'cooke-cutter'... where it's interested in pumping out capable newspaper photographers. I think the whole field trip was an example where the faculty felt the need for students to see the



pictures and hear Anderson's words. And they are absolutely right. I saw the exhibition during the summer in Edinburgh, Scotland while traveling Europe for two months (while many students were working in coffee shops and tire service stores back in Canada) and when it came to the lecture, sat right in the center of the hall for the best view and ability to hear.

One student asked during the Q&A period if Chris had any advice for the students there. It was:

'Do what you want, shoot what you want.'

I have heard that advice before and kept it in the front of my mind, but now I am taking it straight to heart. I should be in documentary class right now, but I have to print off my portfolio and get other things ready for Canada's biggest photojournalism conference this weekend. The teacher is just going to show pictures that I have already seen anyway.

Thanks to Chris, I am now absolutely sure of my path in photojournalism. I was on the fence on which direction I wanted to take... but now it is clear to me of what I have to do: experience and witness history... and take pictures of that.

*Comment by [Andrew](#) — October 17, 2007 @ [8:04 am](#)*

20. i don't even know how i stumbled onto this blog post, but i can honestly say i'm glad i did.

currently in south america won some stuff...and the only magazine i could find (in english) was a used copy of the december 2007 national geographic...with chris anderson's coverage of bethlehem.

superb, effective, relevant work. then i stumble on this blog and see his work in lebanon, on republicans. stellar work.

odd string of events? yes.

good? absolutely. at least for my soul; i probably should be out shooting...

*Comment by [mustafah](#) — February 8, 2008 @ [1:50 pm](#)*