



IN BET WEEN

Marcel Feil in conversation
with Alec Soth

While Alec Soth was forced inside a hotel room in Rome for a quarantine period, Marcel Feil gave him a phone call and they conversed about photography, social changes and how to connect during intense changes.

MARCEL FEIL: Alec, can you tell me a little bit about how you experienced the Covid-19 lockdown as a photographer?

ALEC SOTH: I've never been one to respond to major news items using my tool, so my initial stance was not to respond to it photographically at all, really. I did not want to document this crisis, nor did I want to photograph my own family or my domestic life. I was a bit stuck really, and frankly a photographic response didn't feel particularly necessary, so I really felt in limbo. What I ended up doing was doodling in a journal, the photographic equivalent of making little sculptures, trying out little things. It was all very meaningless, but I think there was one primary thing that was of significant creative import for me during this whole period and continues now. I have a correspondence with a prison inmate in Minnesota. He's a writer and artist, doing a long prison sentence since 2003, and he wrote me looking for a creative dialogue. We had this pretty intense letter exchange throughout the lockdown period, and it's just been so meaningful. I feel like for me this limbo has been a processing time and a time for re-evaluation. As you know, I'm a project-based photographer and I have never been the kind that needs to make pictures every day. So, in between projects I am processing what's happening, and even though it looks like down time it's important work. I feel like we're all kind of being forced to do this important work right now — culturally, socially and environmentally. Re-evaluate our role in the world and how we go about things.

MF: If we zoom out, it all might be part of a bigger transition, a bigger shift, that also includes an economical, ecological shift, and power shift. I would like to ask you about the importance of the local, the return to a smaller scale territory. If I understand correctly, before you started working on *I know how furiously your heart is beating* you also spent quite some time at home, didn't you? Do you think that being forced to stay at home brings a renewed sensitivity for things? One, which makes you open for new forms of creativity?

AS: I think that's true. To me photography is about going out into the world and, almost devouring it. The time at home was like the cleaning of a slate essentially. And then I was able to restart, and go out into the world refreshed. I think it's interesting that during the periods at home I really haven't turned to the camera, wasn't relying on photography. So, the question really is, how does this medium change in these times? It's a tricky one, and I don't think I have a great answer for you. (laughs)

But I can tell you about something I did right before I took the portraits for *I know how furiously your heart is beating*. Fraenkel Gallery had this experimental space at the time. It was called *Fraenkel Lab*, and they asked me if there was something I wanted to do there. This was at a time when I was trying to find a new way of interacting with my subjects. So, what I said to them is I would like to have time alone in the gallery each morning with one other person. For the first ten minutes of the encounter I would have my eyes closed, so this person could just be in the gallery, get used to the strangeness of the situation. And then after ten minutes I would open my eyes and we would start interacting without talking. There were cameras there, which either of us could use, along with other things including a see-saw. (both laugh) The see-saw actually became kind of my metaphor for the way I was trying to interact with another person, to play together. So, I had incredibly meaningful encounters, but at the end of it there wasn't really anything tangible left, there wasn't meaningful artwork.

It was during that process that I met the choreographer Anna Halpern, whom I ended up visiting at home for a normal portrait session, in which we talked and all of that. Having spent all these times — I think I did 15 of those playful 1 on 1 sessions — I felt a lightness, and so I had a great photoshoot with her. That was when I decided to work with this image of the see-saw in mind. I was still making the picture, I was still guiding the process, but letting the other person push their weight a bit more.

MF: Did this also lead to a different kind of portrait?

AS: Totally, it was a softening of things. I think for a general audience it would be quite hard to differentiate, because there is still quite a bit of distance, in some cases more than others, but it's just a little softer. Don't get me wrong, there are edgier pictures in that series too, but I was able to go to those places because the person I was collaborating with went with me. You know? Took me there.

MF: So the thing that's happening in that 'in-between space' becomes essential for the photographic moment?

AS: Exactly, and if you were to say: Alec, what is your art all about? In one sentence? I would say it's about social distance. I had actually never heard the term 'social distancing' until the pandemic, and when I first came across it I was like: Oh my god, this is what I do!

MF: True. But, when I first looked at *I know how furiously your heart is beating* I thought this is not only about social distancing, also perhaps about being in existential lockdown. The series shows all these individuals in their own interiors — perhaps a kind of projection of their inner self, and a place that is very hard to break through to. Personally, I see a research of mortality and the impossibility to really connect with others.

AS: Exactly, and for me photography has always been about that. I'm in this transparent cage, with a hard piece of glass separating me from the world out there, but there is an exchange of energy that pervades the lens. Using the see-saw metaphor again, there's a fulcrum of energies being exchanged. One person is going higher and lower and we're moving together, even though we're separate. There are many glass windows and reflections in *I know how furiously your heart is beating*, but also open windows. This idea that we're locked in our little worlds but we can open the window, the air comes in, there's smells and taste and we're all connected. This I think is one of the great ironies that the pandemic has showed — how utterly connected we all are. We're at once all separate and also all connected through invisible winds.

MF: And photography is great in touching both separation and connection in a single image!

AS: It is! I myself have a tendency to emphasize the separation, but in fact the act of making is all about connection, and this thrill of feeling connected to the world. At the same time I think photography, more than any other medium, is really good at communicating the feeling of alienation.

MF: Now that there is a stronger urge to connect with others and the planet in a more responsible and sustainable way, what can photography do? Can it establish such connections?

AS: I mean, speaking for myself only, I think this phenomenon of separateness and connection is the experience of consciousness and, you know, poets have been dealing with this since the beginning of language. So, I don't know if photography as an art form is there to solve any of these problems. I think it's another way in which we reflect on the human condition and the state of consciousness itself.

MF: Then perhaps photography, or art in general, can give a sort of solace?

AS: Yes, I would say so. It's funny you should use that



word, because I curated a show at AIPAD Art Fair a year and a half ago and it was called *A room for solace*. It was all pictures of interiors creating a space for solace, which is very much a word that I attach to what I want to do. If I were to make an analogy to music, I think in the times we live in there's great value in music that brings people together, so they can dance and feel connected. But if I were a musician I would probably be writing, you know, some bitter sweet songs. Do those have a value? Yes, it's just a different kind of value and it's more about solace for the difficulty of making your way through this world.

You know, if I could be a techno DJ leading tens of thousands of people to dance that would be great, but I don't have it in me. And, maybe similarly as a photographer I could be working with communities - I think that's fantastic and maybe that's the way forward for the medium, but there is a place for sombre music too. The medium of art is so large that it's going to respond in many different ways to the situation. There will be the equivalent of punk music photography and rap music photography and you know, all of that's valid. And all of it is a way to process the times we're living in.

MF: Is this something that you try to do with 'Little Brown Mushrooms'? Creating a different way of connecting and sharing?

AS: It is! 'Little Brown Mushrooms' from its bottom is about being collaborative. For me it's an attempt to experiment and try different things. It's like, I know my voice as a singer, but sometimes it's good to play with other musicians and try different things, even if that's not my most authentic solo voice.

MF: Like a jam session?

AS: Yes, exactly!

MF: For the moment however we are still in varying forms of isolation and limbo, it's quite unclear where this chapter in history will bring us. For some of us it raises fear, but then being forced to step away from your usual habits can also be a very healthy process.

AS: Absolutely, the way of force needs to be burned down to have new growth.

MF: This is being communicated very clearly by the mass demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, happening all around the world since the on-air murder of George Floyd. Conversations about structural racism and police violence are happening everywhere, and spreading a strong call to action.

AS: I've been reading a lot about the 1991 Rodney King beating and the ways that technology spread the video recording around the country. Now, we have this horrific video of George Floyd's murder, which was distributed instantaneously around the globe, catapulting the flow of information. I live in south Minneapolis and after George Floyd was murdered I received a lot of magazine requests to photograph the sight, but I turned them down because of the racial politics of being a white photographer covering this.

MS: Things need to change and doors need to open to make way. I mean most museums and cultural institutions are still like white strongholds and not representing the demography. Holland has a long colonial past and therefore also a substantial Black population. And although we are seen as one of the more tolerant countries by some, it's a myth! Because there's a thin line between being tolerant and being indifferent.

AS: I recently spoke with a Black photographer in Minneapolis, who'd moved there from the South, and she said that there is a passivity there that is more racist in the way that it hides things. This blow-up that just happened has exposed everything that was beneath the surface. And I really believe that, when the history of this time is written, the role that the pandemic and technology played will be enormous.

MF: So, technology, and therefore also photography, enables people to create communities with a platform to channel and spread their voices, impressions and experiences out into the open. While also bringing solace to the moments when that feels most difficult?

AS: Absolutely. I think technology really changed the nature of protest and the ways in which violence is exposed and justice is called for — anyone can do it. ●

ALEC SOTH is a photographer who is best known for photographing the Midwestern United States. Soth's early work include a self-published book of portrait and landscape photographs entitled *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, which was the result of his travels along the Mississippi River. His work is included in a number of permanent collections, including those at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.