

## 50 Questions with Photographer Alec Soth

AnOther : 10-12 minutes : 1/14/2022

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Lead Image Carmen. Williams, Arizona, 2020 © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

Like his photographs, **Alec Soth** is gentle, unassuming, and possessed with tremendous sensitivity and depth. He crafts his own path by bearing witness to his subjects without disturbing the scene as it unfolds. Highly attuned to the moment, he sees invisible connections across time and space that allow us to understand who we are as a people and as individuals.

Combining verse with light, Soth creates sonnets, elegies and odes to American life that engage both intuition and the imagination in equal measure. In 2018, Soth embarked on a journey following the route of Abraham Lincoln's funeral train from Washington DC to his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, as a means of mourning the schism that has torn this country in half – just as it did 160 years ago during the Civil War.

In 1865, poet Walt Whitman stood along that very route and composed the elegy, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. After realising the need to broaden his scope, Soth drew inspiration from Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* and adopted a stream-of-consciousness approach to making work, literally throwing a dart on a map to see where he would drive to next. Over the next three years, Soth travelled the nation, using his camera as a way to engage with people and the landscape.

The result is *A Pound of Pictures*, a monograph from [Mack Books](#) and exhibitions with concurrent shows at [Sean Kelly](#) in New York, [Weinstein Hammons](#) in Minneapolis and [Fraenkel Gallery](#) in San Francisco. The title was inspired by a Los Angeles vendor who sold photographs “by the pound”, a notion that resonated with Soth. “How much does a photograph weigh?” he writes in the book. “Nowadays this question sounds as absurd as measuring sunlight on a bathroom scale. But for those of us who've made a life out of recording light, there's mass to the amassing. Negatives, contact sheets, enlargements, books – a tonnage of reflections.”

*A Pound of Pictures* is a window into both our world and Soth's process itself. In every photograph, there is what we see and what lies beneath. Much the same way, Soth answers our 50 questions with consideration, sincerity and just the right amount of playfulness.

### 1. What is the first piece of art you ever created?

I made a handmade book for my cousin when I was a little boy and I was so proud of it.

## **2. Where do you go to get inspired?**

I try to go inside. I close my eyes and sometimes imagine I have a secret museum of my mind. I try to imagine going there and seeing what I see.

## **3. Where do you go to create?**

I am a homebody and an introvert but for whatever reason to make work, I have to go out in the world to create.

## **4. What is the happiest accident you ever had making art?**

I shoot on film and you can accidentally double expose the film. Normally it's a disaster but I had one that was magical and became one of the signature pictures of my last project, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*.

## **5. When did you feel like you made it?**

When I received copies of *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, the first book that I published, because it was a physical tangible thing.

## **6. Who is your favourite poet?**

William Carlos Williams.

## **7. Where do you go to renew your spirit?**

My library.

## **8. What is your favourite time of day or night?**

Early morning when it's still quiet.

## **9. What is your favourite journey?**

Always a road trip, always in a minivan, and I still like going along the Mississippi River even if I don't make work.

## **10. What music do you play while road tripping?**

Very early on I found Low, a band from Minnesota, and recently they came out with a new album so I'm listening to them again.





Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2021© Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

**11. What's your go-to meal at a highway rest stop or local diner?**

It's funny. As you are speaking my daughter is handing me a hamburger and French fries, which is not my go-to meal. It's an egg salad sandwich.

**12. What's your favourite American tourist destination?**

Graceland. I've been to Memphis so many times but I hadn't gone because I was snobby against it – and then I loved it. It's actually quite modest.

**13. What's the most surreal town or city you've ever visited in the US?**

Nome, Alaska, in the summer. It's light all day long.

**14. What's the best discovery you've ever made while wandering?**

In a used bookstore, I found a legitimately signed Andy Warhol book. It's a metallic pop-up book and it's super rare.

**15. What's your favourite thing about Minneapolis?**

I can live pretty anonymously there. It's very comfortable.

Where do you go to renew your spirit? "My library"

**16. If we came to Minneapolis, where should we go?**

All my go-tos have been torn down. It's really painful. But yes, our most famous nightclub: First Avenue.

**17. What is the mood in Minneapolis these days?**

It's still quite unstable. It's been terribly tumultuous.

**18. What brings the people together?**

I'm in New York right now and I was just waiting in line for a Covid test. It was really cold outside and there was a solidarity amongst us. It's a crappy situation but we're all in it together.

**19. How does photography help you overcome a feeling of separation?**

It forces me to engage with the world and it's an excuse to wander into people's lives, which causes me to connect to people.

**20. What's the last thing you took a photo of?**

On Saturday, there were a million pigeons in a parking lot. This man was feeding them and somehow out came buckets to feed them.



The Coachlight. Mitchell, South Dakota, 2020© Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

**21. What makes a great photograph?**

About anything truly special, there's no formula.

**22. What's the last exhibition you went to?**

*The Contemporary Print: 20 Years at Highpoint Editions* at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

**23. What do you collect?**

I collect photo books of all sorts. One area of specialisation is photographically-illustrated children's books. I also collect vernacular ping-pong photographs – I think I have the definitive American collection.

**24. What's your most treasured possession?**

I don't collect a lot of art but I have a more modern print of August Sanders' *Three Young Farmers* that is a prized possession.

**25. What's your favourite thing about the art/photography world?**

I can make a living in this insane way. There's actually a structure for which I can survive financially doing what I do.

**26. What's your least favourite thing about the art/photography world?**

Equating creativity with commerce and keeping those two elements aligned – so the best thing about the art world is also the most challenging thing.

**27. What art jargon do you find most offensive?**

I don't actually get offended. I'm pretty easy going.

**28. Which artist has had the biggest impact on you?**

John Cage. I discovered him as a teenager and I can continually keep discovering him.

**29. Which artwork has had the biggest impact on you?**

John Cage's *33 1/3*. You listen to silence. I think the highest achievement of an artwork is that afterwards you experience the world as a piece of art. John Cage devoted his life making the world a piece of art.

**30. And what is your favourite moment in art history?**

The Beat Generation is hugely romantic and exciting to me.





Carmen. Williams, Arizona, 2020© Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

**31. What are you most proud of?**

My children.

**32. What's the greatest compliment you've ever received?**

Last night my daughter and I had dinner with Susan Meiselas. Afterwards she texted me saying how great my daughter is, but also how great I was a dad. I'll take that over a million art compliments.

**33. What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

Let go of your grip on the handlebars. You have to learn how to ride the bike at some point.

**34. If you could go back in time and say one thing to your 18-year-old self, what would you say?**

You can't tell someone to relax but at a certain point, that's the best advice and I would give myself that advice. Relax, it will be okay.

**35. If you could have dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would you choose?**

John Cage. I always wanted to meet him.

What is your greatest fear? "Public speaking ... nude"

**36. If you could do anything else with your life, what would you do?**

Neurology or something in neuroscience. The brain is so endlessly fascinating. I feel like the longer I make art, I'm just trying to understand consciousness.

**37. What do Americans, no matter where they are from, have in common?**

We're all connected by television. When I go to Los Angeles, I feel at home.

**38. What do music and photographs have in common?**

Nothing really, they're very different.

**39. Why do people love selfies?**

The human face is a mystery, none as much as our own.

**40. What do you consider the most overrated virtue?**

Self-reliance.



Tim and Vanessa's. Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, 2019© Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

**41. What do you most value in your friends?**

Openness.

**42. Who is your favorite fiction character?**

Daniel, the angel in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*.

**43. What book can you read again and again and again?**

*The Art of Recklessness* by Dean Young.

**44. When and where were you the happiest?**

Traveling on the Mississippi River.

**45. What do you consider your greatest achievement?**

Not needing to have a greatest achievement.

**46. What is your greatest fear?**

Public speaking ... nude.

**47. Do you believe in life after death?**

No, but the idea of heaven is programmed into me.

**48. Do you believe in God?**

The same.

**49. What are you thankful for?**

Just about everything. I'm insanely lucky.

**50. What makes a legend?**

The story.

Alec Soth: *A Pound of Pictures* is at [Sean Kelly](#), New York (January 14 – February 26, 2022), [Weinstein Hammons](#), Minneapolis (January 28 – March 26, 2022), and [Fraenkel Gallery](#), San Francisco (February 3 – March 26, 2022).