

# ARTFORUM



Alec Soth, *2008\_08z/0215, 2008*, color photograph, dimensions variable.  
NEW YORK

## Alec Soth

SEAN KELLY GALLERY

475 10th avenue

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Alec Soth's first show at Sean Kelly following his departure last year from Gagosian presents about half of the fifty photographs that make up "Broken Manual," 2006–10, a series that originated in Soth's preoccupation with the idea of escape. It is, as he puts it, "about the desire to run away and the knowledge that you can't." The "Manual" of the series' title, a volume supposedly penned by Soth's alter ego and available as a limited edition catalogue, is a homemade-looking primer on how to disappear and includes instructions ranging from disguise techniques (long hair is preferred) to how to scavenge for food (Dumpsters are freshest early in the week). The photographs, which both illustrate the text and circulate independently, present a collection of enigmatic subjects captured in the high-detail prints of Soth's large-format camera. Portraits such as the verdant *S., Alabama*, 2007, in which a heavily bearded subject stands partly camouflaged by a vegetable garden, convey Soth's respect for both the man's anonymity and his system of self-sustenance. Meanwhile, in *2008\_08z10215*, 2008, the focus on an otherwise mundane clothes rod inside a whitewashed cave dwelling suggests Soth's fascination with the resourcefulness of the recluse lifestyle. A wall-length installation presents stacks of the manual itself, which, together with a tattered collection of notes and clippings, translates the possible imaginings of these lone men—found via the Internet or simply by chance along the road—into material form. The manual is broken, Soth explains, because of its failure; none of his subjects had fully escaped and all remained connected in some way to a social world. But in the end, broken or whole isn't actually the point. His pictures, which he once described as "little melancholy poems," touch on the questions of how to organize a life, the choices we make, and the consequences of those choices.

—Margaret Ewing