

ALEC SOTH

For those tapped into
the world of photobooks,
the work of Alec Soth is
a familiar presence.



While most of us are aware of his slower, meditative images, Soth has also produced publications that stray from traditional methods, releasing them through his experimental arts institution dubbed Little Brown Mushroom. Between 2008 and 2015, the imprint's zines and books emphasized the lively relationship between image and text, packaged and sequenced into intentionally affordable vessels.

One such project is *LBM Dispatch*, a series of seven newspapers made between 2012 and 2014. For each issue, Soth and writer Brad Zellar embarked on a weeks-long road trip, documenting various regions in the US through the quirky banality of local news. That collection of destinations—*Ohio, Upstate, Michigan, Three Valleys, Colorado, Texas Triangle* and *Georgia*—are now out of print, but their impact is felt by Soth to this day.

Cat Lachowskyj: I am going to be honest with you – out of everything you have created, *Dispatch* is the only project that I find myself personally drawn to. You put together these newspapers over the course of almost three years with Brad Zellar, who wrote the text for each issue, and I get the sense that the impulsive nature of this project fundamentally informed its heart and soul. What initially prompted you both to set out on a road trip to make work together?

Alec Soth: I have to say, you saying it's your favourite thing actually makes me really happy. One of the cool things about making stuff over a long period of time is that people do have favourites, and each thing has a special place in my own heart as well. Brad and I met through his publication *Suburban World: The Norling Photographs*, which came out of an archive of suburban newspaper photographs that he discovered. Brad was looking for a writer, and asked me to write the text for the book. He was happy with it and we met at some book party, and then that was it for a while, but it was the foundation of our friendship.

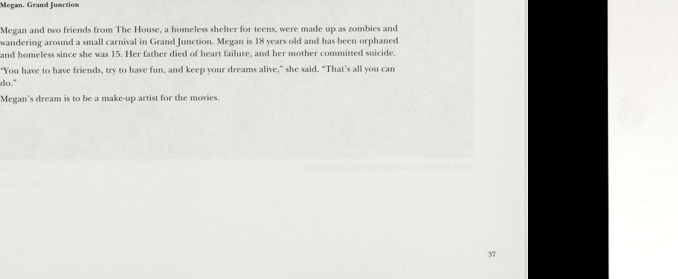
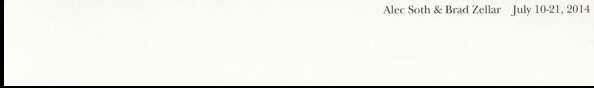
Earlier today, I was thinking through a musical analogy for photographers, and if you extend that metaphor to me, I'm this straight, white, Midwestern male singer-songwriter. When you think about that character, he's a 'nice guy' with a friendly tone whose songs are kind of sad – and that can be annoying. There was a certain point in my career, around 2010, where I was sick of having that voice and I wanted to change it. I made some work centering on a very bitter, sarcastic perspective, and I never pulled the trigger on releasing it, but it did push me to start shaking up my voice.

When I abandoned that project, I felt this impulse to work with Brad. That was me moving away from being a mopey singer-songwriter to collaborating in a band and seeing what might happen. I approached Brad with the idea of putting together a news story here in Minnesota, where he was the writer and I was the photographer, so at first there wasn't a road trip component to the work. But after that, this opportunity arose to go to Ohio and we decided to try out the collaboration on the road – that's really where it came to life.

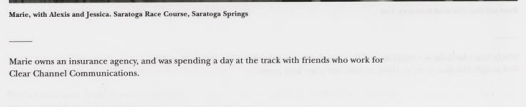
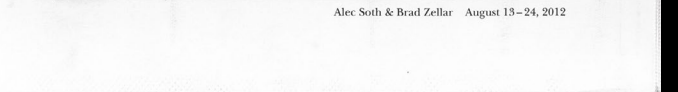
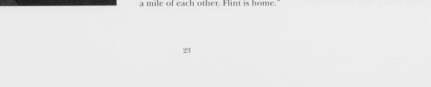
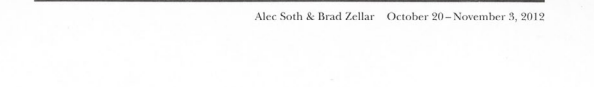
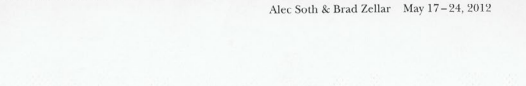
When you went to Ohio in May 2012, how did you streamline the project after those initial experiments in Minnesota? How did you make the decision that what you created should result in an actual newspaper, rather than standalone news stories?

So in Minnesota, we had no idea what we were doing. It was the end of 2011, and I was using a large-format camera and colour film, which was ridiculous for what we were trying to do because everything we needed to capture was moving quickly, and Brad was having to stand around and wait for me to take a picture. But right before we left for Ohio, we decided to make a newspaper. I already had the distribution channel through Little Brown Mushroom, meaning I could sell these things and pay Brad. As we went further, those expenses accumulated and the infrastructure got bigger, but that first trip was like us shifting from playing in the basement to doing our first club show.

Alec Soth & Brad Zellar, May 1-15



Alex Roth & Brad Zellar November 19 - December 1, 2011



One of your first photography jobs was at a suburban newspaper, and Brad's first job was also at a small-town daily paper. I find that local newspapers often contain the best storytelling. It might not be highbrow, investigative, *New Yorker*-style content, but there's a creativity in finding excitement in the everyday, and the mundane nature of local news is really the throughline of this project. How do you think your early experiences at a local paper shaped your approach?

It's definitely worth mentioning that Brad has a far more comprehensive journalism background than I do. My photography job at a local newspaper was virtually minimum wage, but still wildly competitive to get. I didn't have a journalism portfolio at all, so I went to the town where the newspaper chain was located, photographed every business on the street and made this specially-crafted portfolio for them – and that's what got me the job.

Did you have a lot of technical experience at that point?

When I started, I was using my dad's old camera, and I had never photographed a sporting event or anything like that. I really had no idea what I was doing, so it was very challenging for me from a technical standpoint. We often think that community doesn't exist, but anyone who has done that kind of reporting sees how infrastructure works. I eventually felt burnt out on it, and it wasn't until years later that I thought about it as such a missed opportunity.

Were those lingering missed opportunities a driving force behind creating *Dispatch*?

Oh, absolutely. When I wrote the introduction to Brad's book, I wrote about that early experience. Norling's work is so great, and it made me confront the strangeness of time. A city council meeting might not feel interesting today, but fifty years from now, it holds amazing information.

I mean, incidentally, I've looked back on my own pictures from that period and they're really not interesting – they're pretty terrible and very cheesy. Regardless, that experience was definitely in my mind when we started our project.

How did you present yourself to people, and how did you find stories? I assume your strategy improved with each subsequent trip, but how did you set up an itinerary and how did you know where to look?

Before we went on each trip, we would look at real suburban newspaper stories. Brad is an unbelievable researcher, and he also has an incredible encyclopedic memory. He loves digging, and he is excellent at storing information. I would create a mapped itinerary, send it to Brad, and we would look at every little stop and city that we were passing through. We researched anything that could be covered by a community newspaper – parades, potluck suppers or church events – so that we had possibilities. On that first trip, we primarily focused on community life in America, but after that we got more thematic, focusing on certain keywords and threads that allowed Brad to go on deeper dives into history or folklore, bringing it all together into a spreadsheet. That meant that when we got to a destination, we had pre-established information. We had to have that foundation so that we could always locate something to do, even though we invariably found other things along the way.

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I can't imagine the stress of launching that kind of trip with absolutely no planning.

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During our initial experiments, it was uncomfortable because we had these business cards, but no physical newspaper – it felt fraudulent. But after the Ohio trip, once we had finally made a physical paper, we could collaborate with institutions and present ourselves as something more legitimate. That also mimics my own solo experience as a photographer. When I did *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, I had to fudge it. Later on, I had this professional justification, but there was a goofball mentality that came with it at first.

You can sense that in the work, which gives it a playful spirit. What makes this project stand out for me in contrast to your solo work is that your solitary projects feel much slower and less kinetic. How did the experience of making this quicker work feel?

It felt so great. It was such a breath of fresh air. I was working in that slow space for a while, and I was pretty sick of it. I was also sick of being pigeon-holed professionally into that way of making photographs, too. I mean, I was backing myself into that corner, but it felt like playing acoustic harp or something. I just wanted to have fun and make faster, energetic music with my friends.

Every day, we would get back to our hotel rooms, I would download my files and Brad would write out his notes, and then we would upload our content to Tumblr the next morning. It felt swift and energized with immediate communication, letting go of the preciousness that comes with making things feel important.

And you were also looking for totally different subject matter. You weren't looking for an entire story or atmosphere in a single image, because text was also involved. That's a common thread in most of the Little Brown Mushroom publications: they feel like scrapbooks as opposed to classic photobooks. I was also thinking about how in newspapers, like at your first job, images are used as illustrations for a text – they're a visual afterthought. But in *Dispatch*, image and text depend on one another.

Yeah, I confronted this experience during a recent *New York Times* commission – the pictures were totally an afterthought, an illustration. But the beauty with Brad was how naturally we understood each other. Brad has a deep knowledge of photography, photobooks and literature, and knew not to stomp all over what I was doing by over-explaining things. Similarly, I knew what he was going after as well, and we really did have this musical understanding of one person having a solo, and then combining our pieces in another section.

In so much photographic literature, the scales are always off. It's either so many words accompanied by a few pictures, or vice versa. My early model was always children's books, because those tend to nail the right balance.

He could immediately tell when I was visually attracted to something, but he wouldn't run over and interrupt the scene. He would start walking around somewhere else, getting the flavour of the overall picture, and when I was done he would step in and interview the person while I immersed myself in the broader scene. And since we didn't have a real editor, we could just goof around—we didn't have to illustrate anything, because it was ours.

What was the style of writing you both wanted to achieve? For those who haven't seen an issue of *Dispatch*, Brad's writing is in there, but there are also quotes from other sources and references to external inspiration. What's great about the mixture of photographs and writing is that both mediums are simultaneously specific and open-ended. It's this stream-of-consciousness experience punctuated by flashes of clarity.

For some time, Little Brown Mushroom's identity revolved around the relationship between words and images, and I always thought of those components searching for balance on a scale.

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Brad understood that a caption could give a little information, but that it is a counterweight—you don't want to describe everything in the photograph, because that collapses it. It's about finding something that can take it in another direction, including longer essays so that the writing maintains its own spot, just like I have some longer photo sequences or bigger pictures.

We didn't really talk through the balance—it was very fluid and natural. The thing that breaks my heart is that I don't think I'll ever have such a fluid relationship with a writer again. I've worked with other writers in the past and have had some good experiences, but it was like Brad and I were occupying the same mind.

That's endearing. Who were some of the other people that came with you on the trips? How did that evolve over time?

There was always someone else in the car with us. Before the *Ohio* issue, I hired a student named Galen as an intern, and his first task was coming with us on the road trip. I didn't really know him that well yet, and I later learned that he was terrified throughout the entire journey. His involvement was great, and other people were involved at different moments along the way. The idea was to change the dynamic every time to give each trip a different feeling and have someone else to talk to. For the second issue, *Upstate*, I invited an assistant named Sarah who helped me out in Rochester, and she brought all these other qualities to the project.

What was the grind like when you finally compiled each issue? You always put them together the week after you returned from a trip.

Of course there were acres of material—an exponential amount more than we published. But we had already compiled all the text and images on Tumblr before we returned home. The first and second issue were printed at this place in New York that does newsprint, so it was very cheap. But the second time we did it, there was a disaster in the printing and we had to re-print everything, and I think that's when the agonizing growing-up process started. After the first two issues, we switched to offset printing, meaning it cost four times as much to generate, but I was committed to keeping the selling price the same so that people didn't feel like they were getting ripped off. That meant that it didn't make sense economically, so we had to start finding money in other ways. That's when we started partnering with institutions, and it got bigger and bigger. And more difficult.

How long were you on the road for each issue?

It was longer for some. The first one was faster, but each trip took approximately two weeks. That timing was built out of my own philosophy for road trip photography, which revolves around the fact that I can only sustain the energy for a couple of weeks. I like to be all-in with it, and a few weeks is about as long as I can do. Some other trips required longer distances, such as the *Texas Triangle* issue, where we encountered a huge ice storm and it took us forever to get home.

Yeah, it feels like if you went out for a longer period of time, the work wouldn't possess as much of that frenetic urgency and playfulness.

Totally. I'm sorry to keep bringing it back to music, but while we were travelling, I thought a lot about bands on the road, and I just don't understand how they do it. Maybe it's because we didn't have an audience, but I can't imagine doing shows over and over again for a long period of time. I would get so burnt out.

The organization and logistical elements were pretty substantial—we had to figure out three hotel rooms every night for every stop along the way, paying for all those meals, and all that stuff was my job.



Definitely. Now that these newspapers and road trips are over – and hindsight is 20/20 – how would you say that *Dispatch* influences the way you work now? What imprint has it left on you, and how do you see it affecting not only your own work, but your perception of other people's work?

That's an interesting question. Something that I learned then, and something that I keep re-learning over and over again, is that when you don't know what you are doing at the beginning of a project, that's actually really good, and you need to immerse yourself in that because that's where new life grows from. But it also can't be sustained forever – it is a temporary phenomenon. There are different ways to generate that new life, and sometimes it might be collaborating with someone, but sometimes it means shutting everyone out. I think that there was a lot of magic between Brad and I working together, but it was also something that couldn't sustain itself. Brad would always talk about doing all 50 states, and I thought he was out of his mind. It would have been horrible by the end.

That is fucking wild. Well, that explains why you two have such a special relationship – he's one of a kind! I was thinking about how these newspapers, which you wanted to be accessible and not so precious are now out of print and perceived as rare, collectible items. The first time I encountered this project was while working at the Harry Ransom Centre – the institution you collaborated with for the Texas Triangle issue. The photo curator, Jessica McDonald, showed it to me in an archival box, perfectly preserved without a single crease. I know that must weird you out. Can you talk about that?

This is an ongoing occurrence with Little Brown Mushroom, which was built on the foundation of making cheap things. We never wanted to make money – we wanted to break even. But in this little corner of the book world that I'm in, people buy things because they are special – they always want the signed thing or the limited edition copy. We had the spirit of making a large amount of cheap copies with the first *Dispatches*, but without massive infrastructure, reprinting is very problematic. It is super expensive to print something all over again, because you never know how many copies you are going to sell, and no one wants a second edition because they're thinking with their creepy collector mentality. Then, you're suddenly sitting on boxes and boxes of stuff and you have no way of getting it out to people. The economics of the art world is the same in this tinier photography world – it's all based on supply and demand, and it bugs me.

That's a shame. From the moment I saw *Dispatch* for the first time, I wished I was aware of it during its inception and release. And now everything is sold out.

I know. It's something I face in my own practice all the time. I used to be with a publisher whose whole philosophy was based on things being sold out. We printed a couple thousand copies of *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, meaning it was instantly gone, and people were upset that they couldn't get it. I was always scared to print more copies, because I thought the work would lose its luster. But now I'm working with a publisher who's amazing with managing distribution, and he just notified me today that we're reprinting *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, which is so great because it can live on. With Little Brown Mushroom, we just didn't have that, because it's such a huge investment, and it was too big for us.

We've spoken a lot about materials, but I want to shift into speaking about the evolution of the subject matter in *Dispatch*. Something a lot of travelling photographers need to question is how they photograph others, thinking about who they are drawn to and why.

I was thinking about this while I made the photos for that *New York Times* commission I mentioned earlier. I was asked to photograph two neighbourhoods in Chicago, one where the average lifespan is 90 years, and another neighbourhood where the average lifespan is 60 years. It was complicated, and I thought back to the *Dispatches*, where I tried my hardest to photograph both wealthy communities and poor communities.

Man, it is so fucking hard to get access to wealthy people. When we were in Texas, it was very important for us to get access to wealth, and we pulled out all the stops. I asked Anne Tucker at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to introduce me to people – not necessarily to be critical of them, but to represent a different world – and we had a hell of a time. There is an ongoing problem in photography regarding the way that poor people are documented, and a lot of it is logistical – wealth walls itself off, and we struggled with that mightily. The overemphasis on poor communities is a real problem in broad social documentary work, and I would say that with *Dispatch* we were cognizant of it, worked on it, but we didn't do an amazing job of dealing with it.

So how does that make you feel, looking back at the way you present American society in *Dispatch*?

I think about this a lot. Travelling around the US left Brad and me feeling very good about the country, as interaction usually does. People were so welcoming, and we would go to some Pentacostal church where everyone was so friendly. Things might have felt batshit crazy, but it also felt very open. When Trump started running years later, and then was elected, it really screwed with my head. I now spend so much time second-guessing myself and asking: who are these people that I interacted with? I worry and wonder if I was lying to myself, or if I was getting an inaccurate read on all the dynamics involved, because I know about the incredible collapse of rural life and opioids and the lack of infrastructure that makes people angry. I would have a hard time doing this project now, and that makes me reflect on all my past work.



So many things having to do with compassion, empathy, and basic human rights are politicized in spaces where politics really shouldn't have a say. It makes people operate in binaries.

I think that by getting out and being with people, you can get out of those binaries. But right now, I am fully in a binary mode, and maybe that's part of the problem. I don't know. I've been pushed to confront myself and others and it's hard to be empathetic towards someone's complexity when they are wearing a MAGA hat.

A city council meeting might not feel interesting today, but fifty years from now, it holds amazing information.

And it's challenging to work around reducing someone to a trope when you see them doing it to others every day. So now that you're necessarily stuck inside because of the pandemic, and so much of your work is motivated by moving around, is that strange for you?

I'm questioning everything. Right now in the pandemic, I simply can't move around, but I've always been troubled that I need to travel to make work. It's not great environmentally, and it's also not great conceptually, so I am concerned about that. I'm lost. I've tried doing little things in my immediate vicinity, and I've really struggled with that – it feels forced. So yeah, I'm kind of a mess, but here we are.

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