

Reporter's Notebook: Alec Soth

Wednesday, January 23, 2008 by Jeff Severns Guntzel in
News



Alec Soth grew up a pathologically shy kid in Chanhassen. These days, he has a body of work that is a sort of documentary history of his encounters with strangers.

Soth flipping through

Perfect Strangers

. Photo: Nick Vlcek)

At his St. Paul studio, he pulls a black box labeled "1993-1995" from his shelves of archived negatives and proof sheets. Inside sits a stack of black and white prints from a project he called "Perfect Strangers."

Often, he would just call numbers from

City Pages

personal ads (these were the pre-internet days) and slog through a lot of rejections. Or he'd go to the park. Or find kids at the State Fair.

"I would just photograph every type of person." He says, flipping through the prints. "It was the process of learning why one person is more interesting than another. I was terrified. I would be shaking."

He's performing a hushed assessment of each photo: "This is my kind of guy...she's not...she is..."



Doing this, he learned what he likes--though he can't quite put it in words--and he learned how to deal with strangers.

"I'm much more focused now and I can weed out a lot of stuff beforehand."

Soth's studio manager Eric Carroll at his desk. Photo: Nick Vlcek

Eric Carroll, Soth's studio manager and sometimes photo assistant, says he learned quick that "every time Alec clicks the shutter, he does so with conviction."

"It speaks volumes about his pre-editing process," he adds. "I would argue that most of Alec's working process is researching, dreaming, and thinking about the pictures he wants to make before he goes out in the world with his camera."

Carroll tells a pretty amazing story of his first time out with Soth as a photo assistant. His most important task was loading the 8x10 negatives for Soth's camera into cartridges that slide into it from the side.

The photographer and his assistant were in a Best Western in Park Rapids, MN. Soth's requirements for a hotel are Wi-Fi and a bathroom with no windows (for loading and unloading light-sensitive film). It was a shoot for

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magazine and Carroll was tasked with loading somewhere between 60 and 80 film cartridges.

Soth dictated his process to Carroll:

1. Load in the bathtub--it minimizes dust.
2. If the light in the bathroom is fluorescent, be sure its been off for ten minutes because the glow can fog the film.
3. Stuff a towel in the gap at the bottom of the door.

Soth dropped number four on his way out the door: "Oh, by the way, when I do this I usually do it naked." Again, to minimize the dust. "It was sort of a Columbo move," Carroll says.

"So when the day is done and Alec is wading through his email," Carroll says. "I spend 3-4 hours in a cramped bathroom, naked, unloading the day's film and loading up new film for the next day."

It's a high stakes thing: "You realize," he says, "all that has to happen is a quick burst of light and everything we did that day, everywhere we drove, and every person we tried to convince to be in a photograph was in vain."

Weinstein Gallery owner Martin Weinstein. Photo: Alec Soth

When Martin Weinstein (of Minneapolis' Weinstein Gallery) first visited Soth in his studio in 2000, he liked some of what he saw and told Soth to "call when you get 10 great pictures." When Soth is reminded of this comment, he laughs and says: "That sounds like Martin."



The two have a tight relationship. Soth has a gallery in Minnesota and one in New York City. His local gallery is Weinstein's. They've been friends for years.

But where Weinstein is looking for a handful of great photographs, Soth thinks more like what he calls "a book photographer, not a wall photographer."

"I'm interested in the way 30 pictures relate to each other," he says. "And I know half of them are not going to be great pictures. But they are going to lead you to the great picture and they have a weight to them as a group."

Soth in his St. Paul Studio. Photo: Nick Vlcek

In this spirit Soth has been rummaging through the "ephemera" of his various projects-- which include

Sleeping by the Mississippi

(photos taken during his travels along the length of the river),

Niagara

(photos taken at and around Niagara Falls, and

Dog Days, Bogota

(photos taken in Columbia, where he lived for two months while he and his wife Rachel completed the adoption of their daughter Carmen, now 5). He's thinking of including a wall or a room of these scraps for an upcoming exhibit of his work in Paris.

Soth's ephemera is scattered over a large table. There are the "dream notes" his subjects wrote for the Mississippi project--a sort of ice breaker assignment for the strangers he met. "My dream is to be famous," reads one. "My dream is to keep Matthew out of trouble," reads another.

There are also photographs from his Mississippi trips he never published. And there is a sign he nicked from a brothel: YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO PICK ANOTHER LADY AT ANY TIME. And from his Niagara project, love letters he collected.

"If there was a nice apartment and I have a decent job," goes one run-on sentence of a letter, "and you felt happy and thought there could be a nice history together would you come home?"



Ephemera on a table in Soth's St. Paul studio. Photo: Nick Vlcek

For his most recent project,

Fashion Magazine

, Soth was commissioned by Magnum International, a highly selective, notoriously fussy collective of photographers founded in the aftermath of World War II by iconic photographers Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The assignment was literally to create a fashion magazine. Soth flew to Paris and took photos of models in their homes and a fashion show at the Grand Palais. And he learned that models weren't really his thing.

The problem, he says, is they are incapable of being natural. "They can't help themselves-- I'm not interested in people who are famous or who get photographed all the time.

French designer Fifi Chachnil in Paris. Photo: Alec Soth

"I was going to photograph Michael Stipe last week but I got out of it," he says. "I did have this idea of photographing him from really far away and seeing if I could get the magazine to go with it. So like having Stipe on a street corner and then being like three blocks away with my camera--just to feel my distance from all of that."

Jonathan Raymond, an art critic who writes, among other places, in *Artforum*

, said of Soth when his work first appeared in NYC in 2004:

"Soth's work represents an old-fashioned kind of image-making...these are scrupulously accomplished photos."



Charles, Vasa, Minnesota. Photo: Alec Soth

I asked Raymond to put Soth's work in context and take a stab at explaining why Soth's work exploded the way it did in 2004.

He sees Soth as a sort of respite from the enormous and cinematic photography (think Jeff Wall) that germinated in the 70's and became quite popular in the 90's.

"I think people wanted more earth in their art and Soth really does that in a great way. His work returns to a tradition of the road photographer who goes out and documents real people and places and lets the decay of the world show."

Soth's list of subjects for

Niagara

, taped to his steering wheel. Photo: Alec Soth

When Soth is out on the road, he often has a list of subjects taped to his steering wheel.

His Niagara list read something like this:

- Man in pajamas



- Scratched out picture

- Night falls

- Wallpaper

- Shower curtain (someone behind?)

- Hotel pools

- Missing dog

Niagara

photo: Alec Soth

Recalling his first studio above what used to be the Acadia coffee shop on Franklin and First, Soth tells an amusing story of early ambition:



"I've tried being different kinds of photographer. My first studio had a little skylight and I thought to myself: I'm gonna do try to turn a buck here and make a pretty still-life. My mom is an interior decorator and I thought maybe she could help.

"So I did these flower pictures and they are really not pretty--I'm not capable of making that kind of pretty picture. Even with still-lives I had to dirty it up and put some old meet in there or something. It's just not for me."

But, he adds, "I never say never. I do have fantasies."

In our conversations, there was something Soth said many times that sticks with me because it can be true of journalism too:

"Photography is an excuse to engage the world."

Soth at work. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Alec Soth

LINKS, VIDEOS, AND MORE PHOTOS!

Still want more? Me too. Here you go...



Weekly goals (longer to read)
 some in progress. ~~MISSING~~
 recorded and picture
 you are old
 follow us
 building plans, building album
 remove left hand side
 right car (reference of model size)
 album - remove
 get ends wrapped in black (right)
 Michelle
 kind of pearls
 bar mirror
 car in window
 makeup

2000 405 555
 0445

show work (more labels?)
 car interior (dash)
 point of 1st of dashboard
 put in wall with metal (Chamber)
 magnet to hold ~~something~~ ~~something~~ ~~something~~
 put at foot of ~~something~~ ~~something~~
 bi-fel posts
 core feet of pink cotton
 making dog
 fill in bed
~~something~~
 Lachelle 1/6/05
~~something~~ ~~something~~ ~~something~~
 these lines guy told plucking
 light bagging pills - thin
~~something~~ ~~something~~

Alec Soth's

website

(<http://alecsoth.com/>).

is full of good stuff. And there is plenty to look at.

Alec Soth's

blog

(<http://alecsoth.com/blog>).

, which may or may not be resurrected someday, a blast. I went back and read everything for this piece, and I could do it again. No money for art school? Soth's blog is a good place to begin your education.

Art Fag City

(<http://artfagcity.com/>).

is a fun blog on art and photography. And Paddy Johnson was good enough to respond generously to my emails about Soth.

5B4

(<http://5b4.blogspot.com/>).

is a blog on photography books. It's a favorite of Soth's and an amazing read.

Magnum is, well,

Magnum

(http://www.magnumphotos.com/archive/C.aspx?VP=XSpecific_MAG.AgencyHome_VPage&pid=2K703R1VX08V).

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Eric Carroll, Soth's studio manager, is an artist and has

a great site

(<http://www.ericwilliamcarroll.com/>).

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Karolina Karlic, who has assisted Soth many times on shoots all over the place, is an amazing photographer. Check out

her work

(<http://karolinakarlic.com/>).

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The

Weinstein Gallery

(http://weinstein-gallery.com/soth_dog.html).

is Soth's gallery in Minneapolis.



The

Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program

(http://www2.artsimia.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page).

put together a great short documentary on Soth. Here it is, in three parts...

And here, for you hardcore types, are some final photographs courtesy of Nick Vlcek...



Soth in the darkroom of his St. Paul studio.

The layout for Soth's upcoming exhibit, his biggest ever, in Paris.

Soth's floor-freezer sized studio printer, working overtime in advance of the Paris show.