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Interview

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Alec Soth



Crossing the boundary between editorial and fine art photography, Alec Soth creates uncanny photographs, ranging from images of honeymooners in Niagara Falls to views of difficult living in Colombia. One of the leading photographers of our time, his work is continuously commissioned by magazines, repeatedly embraced by book publishers, and regularly exhibited by galleries and museums. Artkrush editor Paul Laster talks to Soth about his [blog](#) and its relationship to — and influence on — his photographic work.

AK: Why did you start a blog, and how much time do you dedicate to it?

AS: My first post was last September; I had a new baby and doubted I'd be leaving the house much. I wanted a place for a certain kind of talk. Business chatter on prices, shipping, invoicing, and so forth consumes much of my time as an artist, so I wanted a place to mull over creative issues.

I once had a chance to visit a private arts club in New York. One of its members, [Stephen Shore](#), had a little table where he was showing other members some of his digital books. It seemed like such a great place to exchange ideas. I later learned that one of the rules of the club is that you aren't allowed to talk business.

A lot of artists are hungry for that kind of interaction. We read about the [Cedar Tavern](#), and it sounds so romantic. But what if you live in Minneapolis with two kids? The blog is as close as I get to the Cedar Tavern.

As for time, well, I guess I spend a lot of time at the virtual bar — but it's by my choosing. I never want it to feel like work, and I do take breaks. When I'm traveling and shooting, the blog goes quiet.

AK: While your blog mainly discusses photography, you also post on topics like [poetry](#) and [politics](#). How would you describe your voice?

AS: As a photographer, I've tried not to be limited to a single subject. I want to mix portraiture with landscape and still life. I want to be loose. The same is true for the blog. I don't have an agenda other than to keep following my eye.

AK: You frequently mention other bloggers and their commentary in your posts. Who do you read, and why?

AS: It's a community. Folks like [Joerg Colberg](#), [Christian Patterson](#), [Todd Deutsch](#), [Brian Ulrich](#), and [Zoe Strauss](#) are my buddies. I read them because I think they're smart and funny and they show me new things.

AK: You recently sided with cultural blogger [Jen Bekman](#)'s statement that "just because I'm writing about something doesn't necessarily mean that I'm recommending it." What are you expressing in your commentary?

AS: A blog is not a diary. Big or small, there's always an audience. One thing I've learned is that when you have an audience, there is a good chance you'll be misinterpreted. This is especially true of anything lighthearted. You asked earlier about my voice. One of the great frustrations with Internet communication is that you don't really have a voice. Absent are the subtleties of tone and facial expression. People misread things all the time. It's frustrating.

AK: You often discuss the relationship between editorial photography made for publication and fine art photography shown in galleries. As a [Magnum](#) photographer who shoots for magazines and an exhibiting artist with two [Steidl](#) monographs, what do these ways of visual presentation signify to you?

AS: Earlier I said that it's important for me to not be limited to a single subject. In the same way, I don't want to be limited to a single context. I want to show my work at [Gagosian Gallery](#) and in the [New York Times Magazine](#). Historically, there's been a big gap between these two worlds. I use the blog to grapple with this disparity.

AK: Your blog provides a forum for discussion of your own work, including the recent 26-page [fashion shoot](#) in *W* magazine, which involved everyday people and places in Minnesota, and exhibitions such as your current group show at the [Cinémathèque française](#) in Paris, which generated multiple posts — entitled "[Crying and Flying](#)" — about not wanting to leave home to travel to the show. How do you utilize the blog format to comment on your own activities?

AS: Every week, I get an email from a student or young photographer. Generally they ask me either a technical question (what kind of camera do you use?) or a career question (how do you get a gallery?). I figured the blog was a way to respond publicly so that I didn't have to keep repeating myself.

I didn't actually write a big essay on *W* magazine. I just mentioned that it was on the newsstands, but people started asking me questions and I responded.

While I enjoy this kind of exchange, I try to limit how much I talk about my own work.

AK: Is it important for you to maintain an Internet presence?

AS: It is good to have some sort of presence, but I don't think I need to maintain it myself. I'm on the Gagosian and Magnum websites. That's probably enough. My own website is handy as a central gathering place for information about projects, exhibitions, lectures, etc. The blog is something altogether different. It's not a promotional tool. If anything, I think it probably works against me. The art world is about exclusivity, and blogs are about availability. I don't remember reading [Robert Ryman's](#) blog, but he seems to be doing OK.

AK: Has your blog affected your creative endeavors? Has the process of looking at other blogs and researching for your blog inspired your work in any way?

AS: Absolutely. I'd forgotten how much I missed writing college papers. When you are forced to string words together about a subject, a new kind of thinking emerges. You look more closely, you research, and one idea leads to the next.

With my photography, I'm a big believer in serendipity. The goal is to find the flow of things. With the blog, I feel like I'm exercising my serendipity muscle.

Alec Soth's work is currently on view in [Documents. Memory of the Future](#) at Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo in Spain through June 24; [L'Image D'Après](#) at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris through July 30; and [Centre of the Creative Universe: Liverpool and the Avant-Garde](#) at the Tate Liverpool through September 9. [Dog Days, Bogotá](#), his third book published by Steidl, will be released in October.