

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### "Either Dusk or Dawn": An Interview with Alec Soth

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By Interview by Conor Risch

*Alec Soth unveiled *The Last Days of W.*, his first foray into self-publishing, at Paris Photo this fall. A collection of images he's created over the last eight years, the 48-page artist's book was printed on newsprint and priced at \$17 in what he says was a nod to the current economic crisis. Soth also made a limited edition, which includes a signed placemat made from a photograph he took of the President's empty chair and desk in the Oval Office.*

*Soth has had a coincidental relationship with our current Commander-in-Chief. In 2004, the year George W. Bush was elected to a second term, Soth released his critically acclaimed *Sleeping by the Mississippi with Steidl* and joined Magnum as a nominee. This year, Bush's last, Soth became a full member of Magnum, in some sense completing a rise to prominence that has occurred within the eight years of Bush's reign. Hence there is a certain congruity to Soth's decision to commemorate the end of the era.*

*We spoke with Soth recently about what prompted the project, how the election has changed how he views the images, and what he sees as his role as a photographer.*

**PDN: When did you decide that you were going to put the "Last Days of W" series together and create the newspaper?**

Alec Soth: I did a four-part series for the *Telegraph* magazine this last year. It was about the decline of the American empire and the rise of China. I spent a lot of time with this journalist Mick Brown driving around America, looking at stuff, thinking about the state of things, and also seeing it from this British guy's perspective, which was interesting. And I just felt this urge to mark it in some sort of way.

The *Telegraph* did a really great job with them, but that's just the nature of [editorial photography] where some pictures exist to illustrate the story, other pictures that I love don't get used, and so it was a way to reclaim some of that material, as well as other things that I have done over the last eight years, and to mark this time. But I didn't want to do it in this formalized sort of way by saying: here's the definitive project or whatever.

I was thinking about newspapers because when there's a news event, a newspaper comes out—after this election all these newspapers became collectible, something that you save and show your grandkids. I thought [these last days of Bush are] a time that I want to mark for 30 years later to look back at, so it was a way to do all of that. And then I didn't want to publish it as a book. I thought it was in the spirit of the times—we're all short on cash—I'll just do it lean and mean on newsprint and make it semi-disposable and also to play with this do-it-yourself esthetic. And it's really been fascinating doing that. I've got so much to learn, but it's been fun too.

**PDN: What was behind your decision to create the placemat for the limited edition?**

AS: I really produced this thing to be as cheap as possible and certainly was not doing it in any sort of money-making way, and one of the places I was first going to distribute it was at Paris Photo, because I was showing the work there and I wanted Magnum to distribute it. But it was a big ordeal for them to take in all these crates and deliver the stuff there and all of that. There needed to be some sort of financial incentive, so as is almost always the case, they asked to do a special edition.

I really felt like it was contrary to the spirit of the thing to do this fancy box with the print, you know, the whole frou-frou design. So I wanted something cheaper, and I had this idea—it had nothing to do with placemats, it was all about laminating it. I had this laminating machine, which is like newspapers, it's this old, dumb technology that's really great, and so we started laminating stuff and it just came out looking like a placemat. And so I said, 'that's kind of funny, you're having breakfast, and you read your newspaper.' It wasn't a lot of thought behind it.

**PDN: As you were editing all of this work from various points in the last eight years together, did you discover themes or areas of interest in your work that you had not been aware of?**

AS: I learned a lot with this *Telegraph* assignment, because the thing is, I always downplay the social commentary aspect of my work. I've shown "Sleeping by the Mississippi" a bunch in Europe and it's been read as some sort of critique of America, and I've never seen it that way. But given these times, and also all the traveling that I've been able to do over the last few years, I was seeing things differently and in a politically charged way, and so I looked at some of that older work differently. A lot of it was from other assignments, too, and things that did have some political weight—a *New York Times* story on the mothers of marines, that sort of thing—and it's not like I don't have those feelings, it's just never been what the other books have been about.

In America, a lot of people have woken up to how horrendously things have gone awry, so I guess to a certain extent I was waking up to some of that too. But again, I was really uncomfortable with having a political motivation. There's a great guy at Magnum New York, my good friend Jonathan Roquemore, who I was always talking to and bouncing ideas off of, and he wanted to release *The Last Days of W.* before the election, and I just thought that would be viewed as trying to steer something, and I just don't think it has that kind of weight at all. For me it was really about this idea that it's over, it's now this kind of in-between time, this lame duck period. Of course at the time I had no idea Barack Obama was going to win, and during most of the production of this I had no idea where things were going to go, so I was just thinking about the future, and forgetting about the political aspect of it, there's also financial side of things; these are dark days.

**PDN: But did the election results change the way you view these photographs?**

AS: Well it was funny because it was printed and ready to go, and then it was odd that after the election the tone felt wrong suddenly, because suddenly there's this new

optimism. And, of course, I couldn't anticipate that, and in a way I think it's funny how the mood changed the next day. After the election America was proud and happy to say it had elected a black man, and there was no way to predict that there was going to be that sort of universal celebration from all political sides, and that major tone shift. It was funny because I went to Paris, we were going to release the thing, and [a person at Magnum] was trying to talk me into doing 'The First Days of Obama' too and making it a combo. I just didn't want to go there, I didn't want it to be my life. I guess it's another reason I'm glad it's not a book. But it is a marker of this time, and maybe it would have been better before the election for those reasons, but oh well.

**PDN: A number of the images—the “Reagan’s Limousine” photo, for instance—to me conveyed this sense of aging and obsolescence, as if we’re looking at a culture being left behind.**

AS: For me the mood of the newspaper is just one of exhaustion. And this was my feeling doing that *Telegraph* assignment—just sort of worn out. And also that America's role, and this is where the financial crisis was such a surprise, but America's role as the number one was really fading and we can't throw our weight around the world in the same way. What's bizarre, with Obama's election and how meaningful that was to the rest of the world, and then with this financial crisis, how our little housing problem screws up everybody, is to realize in fact we still are right there at the top. So there has been a major tone shift, but I do hope I was getting a little of that feeling of the time, which was just endless it seemed like.

**PDN: Endless in the sense that it was just one thing after another?**

AS: Yeah, one thing after another, and the fatigue; the arrogance of the administration just led to a fatigue on the part of the people, and I feel like that's what's changed.

**PDN: Now that it has changed, do you think the images function beyond a document of a time that has passed? As we go forward and look back at these images and the many others that have been created and widely seen over the last eight years, what do you think we gain from looking back at the images?**

AS: For me, even in the newspaper, you wouldn't get this as a viewer probably, but there was a little bit of optimism. Toward the end of the sequence it says "Either Dusk or Dawn" and there are all these pictures that were made, and I developed this as a theme going along, where you don't know if it's dusk or dawn, and the idea is that no matter who's going to win the election, we're on the cusp of some sort of major change here. And for me there was an optimism about not being number one anymore. This relates to the financial crisis as well, that if we're taken down twenty notches, we can just function like a normal country. But do you see that in the pictures? Probably not.

But in terms of the way the pictures function, I sort of came to terms with a long time ago the fact that they don't do anything. With the number of images being seen, they're just pretty mute. And it's odd to be a part of Magnum Photos and that tradition and say that, but actually probably the majority of people within Magnum would say the same thing, it's just a weird little niche sphere that we're in, and it's the rare picture that's going to change anything, so for me how does it function? I don't really know&hellip

**PDN: When you say 'in a weird niche' you mean photographers in general?**

AS: So much of what Magnum once did was it made the iconic image and sometimes it really could have incredible power, but I just think those pictures nowadays are made by cell phones and the person that happens to be there. When I was doing this *Telegraph* thing we were in China, and we were flying back to Beijing when the earthquake happened and there was this question, should the journalist and I turn around and go back? And I faced this same question with Katrina. I had done all this Mississippi work and then Katrina happens—should I go photograph that? I think it would be fine to, but I don't necessarily think I would be offering that much. The person with their cell phone

camera or just the people that happen to be located there, there's such a mechanism for making those pictures and distributing those pictures. That role of really shifting public opinion, I just don't feel like I'm part of that.

**PDN: Then what do you see as your role?**

AS: What's the point of writing a novel? You're just trying to make something full of meaning but it's not necessarily going to create change.

**PDN: It's not going to necessarily join the literary canon.**

Not only [not] join the literary canon, but it's not going to make someone want to quit their job and do something. I have this corny idea of the three levels of art making. The first level is just entertainment, which I think is important, but the second level is information; like if you go to a movie and you just have a good time, great. Then the second level is you learn about how the CIA works or something, that's even better. And then the third level does something to make you change the way you live your life. But if [as an artist] you shoot for that third level without doing the other two you're in trouble. And doing that is a very difficult thing. I wasn't ever trying to hit that nor have I hit that. Someday.

**PDN: It probably happens when you least expect it to.**

AS: Well, I think that's true.

**PDN: Do you think publishing this project, ending this era of exhaustion so to speak, is going to mark any sort of shift in your work?**

AS: In terms of my own work, one thing that I struggle with all the time is, as a photographer I'm introverted. I'm always trying to make my little poems and I'm not

proud of that, but it's who I am, and one of the reasons that I do editorial work and stuff like that is it keeps me honest and it keeps pushing me out into the world. In terms of where I'm going I'm always struggling with that: do I want to crawl into my little hole and do my finger paintings or go out into the world, and I don't know which way this is pushing me. I don't talk about the work I'm doing, it's bad luck, but definitely all of this is shaping where I'm going.

PDN: You mentioned the reaction in Europe to "Sleeping by the Mississippi," and I saw that you're currently showing this work at Haunch of Venison in Zürich. Have you ever had any qualms about what a European audience is getting out of these types of pictures?

AS: My take on it has always been, if I'm writing little poems, then I'm pretty much okay with how people interpret them. The closer it gets to journalism, the more problematic that becomes. But I was really embarrassed with our country and I was really frustrated in a way that was really different this time around. Yeah, I have some qualms about it, because I'm very much an American and I'm very much an American photographer. It's funny, because people will make little jokes to me or whatever and then I say "I'm going back, I'm flying back to Minnesota," which seems like a joke to people sometimes, but it's who I am. So yeah I have some qualms about it. I thought you were going to ask if I have qualms with reproducing magazine pictures or something like that, because I have qualms with everything. I wake up I have qualms. And I also thought you were going to ask about using it in the fine art context, and selling prints, I mean I have issues with that. I have issues with all of it. It's all sort of ethically questionable.

*The Last Days of W.* newspaper is available through [Little Brown Mushroom](#) and through [Magnum Photos](#).

The work will be on display at [Haunch of Venison](#) in Zürich until January 17, 2009. It will

also be on view at [Stephen Wirtz Gallery](#) in San Francisco from January 8 – February 21, 2009.