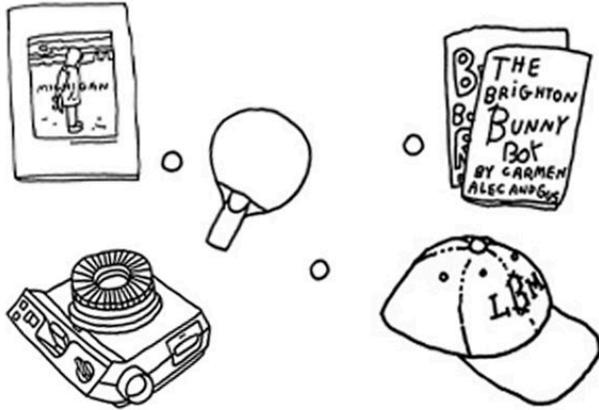


# SEANKELLY

Lesley A. Martin. "When to Hold 'Em and When to Fold 'Em – A Conversation with Alec Soth," *Aperture*, December 2014.



## When to Hold 'Em and When to Fold 'Em A Conversation with Alec Soth



In June 2014, I had the opportunity to visit with photographer, publisher, and increasingly multidisciplinary artist Alec Soth at his home base in Minneapolis, courtesy of the McKnight Foundation—a longtime patron of Soth's work, including his most recent project, the *LBM Dispatch*. In addition to getting a tour of Soth's Little Brown Mushroom headquarters, we also talked about the nature of an evolving photographic practice, the challenge to find new forms for his work, and the sustainability of the current pace of photobook publishing. What follows is an edited version of an e-mail conversation that took place after that visit, touching base with Soth as he traveled variously to Georgia, the San Juan Islands, Connecticut, Arkansas, and other places in between. The main topic on my mind: what happens next?

—Lesley A. Martin

**Lesley A. Martin:** Mr. Soth, you have shown a true commitment to an evolving public output—even when it was apparent that you would much prefer to be hermitted away someplace. Nevertheless, via books from established publishers, posts on your blog and Instagram, publishing yourself and others via the Little Brown Mushroom imprint, or, most recently, hosting workshops about storytelling for the storytelling-indisposed, you have continued to push beyond prior applauded forms. How do you choose the form for a particular body of work and when do you know it's time to move on, to leave old forms behind? In other words: how do you know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em?

**Alec Soth:** It really depends on the projects. I do a lot of smallish side projects: zines, online slideshows, that sort of thing. This sort of activity is analogous to a band playing in the garage: it is meant to be quick, dirty, and a bit out of control. These should be ended fairly abruptly to avoid scrubbing away their essential spirit. My larger projects are more like studio albums. These projects take years. Generally I work on them until I'm sick of them, and then work some more.

**LAM:** You have had a longstanding relationship with Steidl and now MACK Books—ostensibly exactly where a photographer might want to be. Why, then, did you start your imprint, Little Brown Mushroom, and why, as you have tentatively speculated, do you think that it might be entering a different phase for your own publishing?

**AS:** Little Brown Mushroom is the garage I'm talking about. Or a sandbox. It is a place to play with others. But it isn't a business, nor do I want it to be a business. I don't want to worry too much about spreadsheets and market penetration. But for my larger projects, I want to work with someone who understands that kind of stuff. I want those projects to be seen widely.

**LAM:** Do you think there is, inherently, a natural and possibly limited lifespan to this current creative boom of the self- or indie-published photobook? What are the downsides to success in this arena—for yourself and for the community at large?

**AS:** I think there will always be books, but they will become increasingly expensive. I also think there will always be people doing cheap, alternative printing, but my sense is that this will lose some steam over time. Success is always problematic. It is too easy to become comfortable and repetitive. It's too easy to stop taking chances.

**LAM:** Right. I'm also going to assume the continued existence of books; but there is a whole other level of the activity that has come to surround the photobook and photobook-making. At the point when we have festivals or fairs in every city, every country has a regional book about photobooks of that country, and there is an actual PhotoBook Museum—then what? How does or can this make sense, moving forward?

**AS:** There is more than a little irony about our desire to fix the moment permanently. But it's probably just best to enjoy it for what it is (or was) and not expect it to continue on in the same way. But there will be new, great moments. New communities. I'm particularly excited about what is happening at the intersection between photography and performance, for example. There is so much new, uncharted territory.

**LAM:** I'd like to also ask you to talk a little bit more about what you're doing with the LBM Camp for Socially Awkward Storytellers. First, why a summer camp? And second, is this where all that fun in the garage or the sandbox leads? At a certain point, do you pass the keys to the garage to others? Third, this idea of bringing people together and working together is a particularly social way of approaching the act of storytelling. Do you see the future of storytelling—and perhaps of bookmaking—as a collaborative act?

**AS:** I've always been interested in storytelling, but the fact of the matter is I'm a lousy storyteller. I remember having to speak at my brother's wedding. I was so nervous that I wrote everything out. And then my voice trembled so badly that nobody could understand anything I said. I was attracted to photography and the photobook because it allowed me to approach storytelling in an oblique way. I still love this about the medium. But over the years, I've also been pushed and shoved into the role of public speaking. After giving countless slideshow talks about my work, I started to see the creative potential of the form. In order to learn more about it, I created the Camp for Socially Awkward Storytellers. Fifteen artists from around the world came to my studio and essentially taught me about the huge potential of this medium.

Does that mean I see my future as being a collaborative artist? Not at all. I've just spent three years working on a project with a writer; it was one of the great experiences of my life, but I'm dying to get back to work alone on something. That said, I have no idea how my new work will eventually be presented. While I invariably first find myself thinking about the pages of a book, I could see myself giving a performance or doing a site-specific installation. I don't have any definitions just yet, which is part of the fun.

But broadly speaking I've been thinking about this by analogy to the world of music. Most photography nowadays functions like most music: free online. I'm a fan of this and have always engaged in things like blogs, Tumblr, and Instagram. But this streaming flow seems to make more physical, tactile experiences all the more important. This, I think, is part of the reason photobooks, like vinyl records, have become more popular of late. People want to touch something. But people also want an experience. This is where traditional exhibitions as well as more temporary installations and performances come into play. A traditional exhibition is like going to the symphony; a pop-up show is like going to a rave.

**LAM:** Is this also possibly another way in which contemporary practice might be moving away from the photobook as a primary vehicle? I know that anytime you have "Photography Plus" (Photography +

Sculpture, Photography + Video, Photography + Painting), it's hard and probably less appropriate to try to contain it in a book.

**AS:** I don't think that the practice is moving away from the photobook—I just think the tent is getting bigger. To use the music analogy again, the fact that people are buying more vinyl records doesn't mean they'll download less free digital music or attend fewer concerts. In many ways, the multiplicity of distribution platforms is simply the result of the medium's success. So stop worrying already!

**Alec Soth's** work has been the subject of many exhibitions, including *The Space Between Us*, a major retrospective presented at Jeu de Paume, Paris, and Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, 2008; and *From Here to There*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2010. Among Soth's monographs are *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (Steidl, 2004) and *Broken Manual* (Steidl, 2010). In 2008 Soth started his own publishing company, Little Brown Mushroom. He is a member of Magnum Photos. [alecsoth.com](http://alecsoth.com)

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