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ALONE IN AMERICA

TRICIA AND CURTIS ARE LYING ENTANGLED IN THE GRASS. It's 2005 and their shoulders and the smalls of their backs are likely itched by the weeds beneath them. Tricia wears a sleeveless t-shirt printed with the image of an angel of mercy—or perhaps it's an angel of death. She sports a thick black band on her ring finger; her hair dye leaching at the tips as her resting head presses down on the milk-white belly of her partner. The most striking flash of nakedness is not the man's shirtless torso, but the horizontal scars that run the lengths of the couple's bare forearms. They clasp their hands together in the turf. The scene is mournful but not miserable, romantic but not saccharine. Both stare straight at the camera.

The art of photographing the American Midwest so often operates like the telling of a joke: a knowing communion between an artist and audience eager to gain distance from questions of bad taste. And so they chew on the same dry cud of offbeat banality—strip malls, teased hair, gormless quarterbacks, prairie chapels and the folksy charm of Paul Bunyan and Calamity Jane—insisting all the while that here lies an honest vision of the country's extremities. Even so, their hapless sitters are often left stupefied in the middle of the frame—cowboys, beauty queens and sun-dried farmers all victims of tongue-in-cheek reverence in shallow focus. There are few things less compelling than eccentricity trapped in place.

Born and based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Alec Soth has long worked in the tradition of picturing Middle America 'on the road.' Established by earlier photographers like Walker Evans and Stephen Shore, that large-format visual dialect has lent itself to lofty ideas and elitist judgment with equal favour—artists documenting the absurdity of American life as though they are not among its participants. Soth has managed to eschew these trappings throughout a repertory that spans over 25 photobooks and 50 solo exhibitions. His subjects are free to perform for the camera in a manner not designed to catch them out.

There's the portrait of Kym at the Polish Palace in northeast Minneapolis, sitting alone in a glossy vinyl banquet with Valentine's Day decorations encroaching on all sides. This is not an image of the 'last call' loner—it's broad daylight outside and her table is set for two. There's Dottie in Denver, Colorado, pausing for Soth's camera as she walks through a parking lot in a crinoline that bulges against the light polka-dots of her period gown. She is meticulously put together, though there's a haphazard quality to the bow under her chin and the creases in her skirt. Her eyes dart to the right with a kind of off-kilter mischief, likely observing a historical reenactment out of frame.

Much like his shot of Tricia and Curtis reclining in greenery, Soth doesn't suggest these women ought to be metaphors for the Midwestern absurd—rather that we should consider their interior worlds in a rare moment of quiet. The idea that sitters must either be vulnerable or defensive in their body language belies the fact that they can and will easily be both. So too has Soth managed to straddle dualities: artist and photojournalist, obsessive and detached, participating in tradition while striking out anew. It's unsurprising that he's found himself reflected in the contradictory multitude of newlyweds, nude lovers, survivalists, veterans, cheerleaders, prisoners and runaways that fill his pictures. Telling a joke about them, while a well-trod path, is not of interest to him.

You're so often associated with the visual legacy of Robert Frank, Stephen Shore and Walker Evans, and their humanist vision of America "on the road." That photographic tradition draws from an existing album of symbols and images that audiences have learned to read. How do you ingratiate yourself within a genre without simply replicating its safe clichés?

I always talk about photography as a language with different regional dialects. As a young photographer, I learned to speak one particular form of the language using the symbols you talk about. I realised it was

dangerous to do that. Then, when I was still quite young, I thought, "Well that's not cool. I should invent a new language." So I tried doing that in college a little, but you realise that if you invent a new language, no one else can speak it—you're talking to yourself. In the end, I decided not to run away from those existing dialects. I've tried to do it with some amount of nuance and whatever sophistication I can bring to it. It's like someone playing country western music. It doesn't have to all be dumb clichés—you just have to do it for a while and invest yourself deeply to find your way through. I would say that's true no matter what you do. If I instead decided to speak in more of the Japanese photographic language—high contrast and black and white—that's acceptable too. It's also equally as dangerous. It requires time, I guess.

The comparisons to Robert Frank are interesting because, although you are working within that dialect, to me Frank seemed to figure his work as the relationship between himself and an idea—human subjects appear incidental or supplementary to an expansive American theme. It seems like your work operates under the opposite hierarchy—the subject is privileged above the idea.

It's a curious thing about Robert Frank. I actually wasn't so influenced by him when I was starting out. I wasn't in love with his work because I was getting it second or third-hand generationally speaking and was therefore influenced by the people that were influenced by him. But I've come to totally identify with him because he *appears* to be a photographer who's picturing America. But, in fact, he was more so photographing an interior state of mind, especially in his later work. I'm also a very inward-looking photographer and, in the same way, I get uncomfortable making big pronouncements about America ... I know how interior my motivation is. Now it's even harder to talk about America and all that because a project like *Songbook*, for example, was made pre-Trump. My understanding of America has changed dramatically since then.

In what ways?

The idea of *Songbook* was that I was originally working with this writer and we were travelling around America, self-publishing newspapers and [observing] social life in the digital age. There's a famous book called *Bowling Alone*, about this phenomenon of people not being in bowling leagues anymore and spending more time in isolation. We found that to be true, of course, but we also found a lot of optimism while travelling and being welcomed into people's homes. There was a lot of unexpected warmth and joy. You see the news and you see the guns ... but ultimately, you can say, "Wow. These are actually much kinder people than I give them credit for." The Trump phenomenon has changed that. I'm like, "How is this possible?" It does not square with my previous understanding [of America]—maybe I was lying to myself before.

You've spoken about setting out on road trips with a rudimentary list of what you might want to photograph: beards, birdwatchers, tall people. Given the diverse absurdity of the American Midwest, how do you avoid the temptation of sensationalism?

That's a good question. Let me answer it this way. When I'm out driving around looking for pictures, I'm trying to pay attention to what I'm paying attention to. If my head turns at something on the street, I question why my head is turning. If my head turns at an old barn that's really pretty, I might say to myself, "Okay, my head just turned because I've seen a million photographs that look like that and they tell me that it's pretty. I'm going to ignore that and drive on." Then if my head turns at some really whacked-out person wearing an American flag shirt, I can pause and analyse, "Am I really interested in this, or is this because of something else?" ... You become like an investigator: "I'm attracted to that person or place and it's not necessarily because I've seen that picture

before or because it's crazy. Something inside of me is responding." I have to listen. It's not that I'm not attracted to the sensationalistic or the cliché—I am—but I have to weed it out.

In your portraits, there's a sense that the sitting has been negotiated in some way. Your subjects rarely appear put-upon or inconvenienced.

I've always felt guilty of something. I've always felt a bit like I'm using people for my little projects. There is a power imbalance that makes me slightly uncomfortable. A couple of years ago I stopped photographing people altogether for about a year because I was done with that issue. And now I've started again but in a different way. I'm trying to be more conscious of it, which is to say that I'm thinking about people more now. Now, I'm not saying that the work that I've made has done good for anybody. I'm conflicted about this subject.

On the note of sensitivity, I enjoyed reading a recent comparison of your work with that of Peter Hujar. You share a preference for non-invasive, non-sensational aesthetics while also leaving room for the immodest and eccentric.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. When I've been asked about my favourite photographer, I would often say Peter Hujar and I wouldn't know why. It's strange because I think of myself very much as a book photographer and I don't think that was his main form ... There's an intimate quality to his work that's the right balance of intensity, aesthetics and modesty. It's not too much of any one thing. It's such a delicate mix and it's so subtle. And I can say how it's not Mapplethorpe or how it's not Avedon, but I can't really tell you why it's so satisfying and nourishing to me. It's like really good music. You know it when you hear it.

You recently posted an excerpt from Henri Cole's poem 'Chiffon Morning' to your Instagram feed, highlighting in yellow the line "The mind replays what nurtures it." What images, whether childhood or otherwise, does your mind often return to over and over?

We're all replaying stories over and over again. I was visiting a friend who's in town earlier this afternoon—it's that time of year when people who have left Minnesota come back to visit their families. He was asking about the teachers that have meant a lot to me. I always think of [time spent with] my high school art teacher: very simple, prosaic scenes of sitting in class with a certain journal, drawing and writing anecdotes under their guidance. I can watch that scene in my head like I'm watching a movie, even though it's completely ordinary. I think about that teacher so much.

Is that the first time that you can recall being energised about art-making?

Yes. I was doing things that were like art-making but I didn't yet know to define them in that way. It was the first time that it felt socially acceptable to behave like that as a teenager. [People are] always super creative when they're little—and then you reach this awkward age where you don't want to do anything embarrassing. Allowing yourself to be creative again opens up a huge channel inside. It was this teacher who poked that hole.

Back in 2011, you asked what it meant to be a photographer at a time where 500,000 images are uploaded to Facebook every second. Almost eight years later, with presumably augmented rates of uploads, what does it mean to be that same photographer?

I've come to realise that photography is language. You and I are speaking a verbal language right now. If a novelist were sitting next to us, they shouldn't feel threatened that we're having a conversation. "How can I be a novelist when [other] people are using the English language?!" That's the way I feel now. I'm working in this one art form and I shouldn't be

threatened by people communicating via pictures, which is fundamentally the way that photography is being used now. Conversation shouldn't be a threat to art.

On a social media tangent, earlier this year you shared a picture of yourself watching Jimmy Stewart in Rear Window on the plane.

You're taking me down some interesting paths.

Yeah—I'm exposing your entire history. You captioned that photograph with the famous Thelma Ritter line "Mind if I use that portable keyhole?" Do you think very much about voyeurism, its thrills and its failings, while on the road?

There's a reason I became a photographer. It's because I like being over here but also being over there, you know? I want distance and closeness simultaneously, I don't want to be totally in it. I want to be peeking through the keyhole and safely on my side of the door. There's always something voyeuristic about photography for me—and I don't think it's particularly healthy. I wouldn't recommend it for everyone. To live a good and happy life, I think you should be present in the world. But apparently, in this lifetime, this is the way I'm living.

How do you distinguish the idea of being present from the experience of being voyeuristic?

You could make analogies to fishing or hunting. I'm not a hunter, but I understand the idea of leaving early in the morning to go after something—becoming highly attentive to your environment, listening for sounds, listening for movement. But then it's all with the goal of killing the thing. It's this peculiar contradiction which I think is similar to photography. At the moment when I'm in pursuit, I take on this heightened awareness but it's all designed to stop and preserve time rather than existing in the moment and letting it pass. That's the element that's less than healthy: wanting to pin it down, to possess it, and then turning it into some commodity that gets passed around. There's certain ethical lines that you cross. It's all very problematic. Sorry—this interview is causing me to quit. [Laughs.]

And vice versa! Back to Rear Window for a moment, can I ask about the cinematic image? I'm curious which filmmakers have influenced your visual style.

I'm going through a Chantal Akerman phase. She had a video installation that I saw in my early 20s and it blew my mind. I recently bought a DVD of that and realised it also exists as a standalone film. It's one of those rare things that's in the no-man's land between cinema and still photography. I'm obsessed with a number of her films, especially *News from Home* which involves panning shots of New York City coupled with letters from her mother. So Akerman is the biggie for me at the moment.

Could you tell me about your 8x10 camera? I'm interested in how such a large piece of equipment mediates the space between you and your subject.

When photographing another person, you put a lens between yourself and that person which obviously changes your relationship. This piece of glass creates a voyeuristic element. By then putting that piece of glass on a tripod, it turns the apparatus into something like a body form. It's like a third person standing between you and them. It creates distance but is simultaneously non-threatening—it's stable and looks old-fashioned. And then there's this act where I cover my head with a dark cloth, so they're not really looking at me anymore, they're looking at this non-threatening vertical feature. Meanwhile, I'm under the cover staring intensely at them. In that moment, I don't think they have the same feeling as when a camera is lifted to their face. It's very peculiar. It really does change things dramatically. Also, visually speaking, the focal

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length and depth-of-field of that particular camera carve the subject out of space in a way that's quite different to small format photography.

I'd also like to ask about that camera in terms of how much might be lost. It's undeniably slow in operation and you ultimately can't capture every decisive moment. How have you come to reckon with the potential for missing out?

It can be exceedingly frustrating. I have to rule out photographing anything that moves. I have to know I'm missing that from the get-go. The more painful thing is when you see something that happens briefly—a bird lands on the perfect spot on the tree and there isn't time to get it. But I would say that the lack of control also energises things, and it energises me and my presence while looking. It's simultaneously slowing things down and intensifying. To use the hunting metaphor again, it's like you're sneaking up, you're crouching, you're slowly pursuing this thing—it's gradual but also deeply intense. There's something wonderful about that.

Speaking of slowing down while intensifying, your portraits in particular are marked with anxiety—about the end of things, about first loves, about declining health or a declining empire—but they're also totally serene. I think of images like Lee Hall and Quintavious Thomas at Georgia Lions Camp for the Blind (2014), Frankie in Ferriday, Louisiana (2002) and Damien Echols in Pine Bluff (2005), which are at once solemn and full of barely-contained anxious energy.

Anxiety is the gasoline for my particular engine. I can't avoid it. If you knew me when I was young, you would think I'd be the last person to make a career out of photographing people. I was so shy and socially awkward. And photography is such a peculiar thing for me to do but obviously there's a psychological reason for it.

Are there benefits to a jittering shyness that outright confidence can't offer?

Absolutely. I'm now a thousand times more confident—that can work to my disadvantage. When I'm driving down the street and I approach someone, they're reading and analysing me too. If they read fear and shyness on my part, that can be a little disarming for them. But if they read total confidence from me, that can also be off-putting. In the end, I think the healthiest thing to be is honest. So when I'm not feeling shy, to still be honest about who I am, what my intentions are, and try to meet people on that plane even if they don't understand exactly what I'm talking about. You can sense when someone's being honest, I think.

Something that is not discussed too often is the sexual instinct of your work.

I talked about Hujar earlier, who's a very sexual photographer, but he's also just dealing in the realm of intimacy and vulnerability. When you're working in that terrain, sexuality is obviously right there too. It's adjacent. I was talking with someone earlier today about Nicholas Nixon and the role of sexuality in his work. Nixon is considered humanistic but there's a huge sexual element to his practice—photographing the skin of elderly people, for example, is not that far from sensuality. I think it all resides in that same sphere of intimacy. It's like you're in the same zone, you're just in the next room over. That's where my work is at too, I think—it's not explicitly sexual for the most part but I can hear it in the next room.

Going back to Instagram for a moment, I enjoy your ongoing hashtag series #viewfrommyhotelwindow. Now that your profile causes you to journey far and wide, does the thrill of travel still affect your work?

It's funny because ... I was never the person who fantasised about travelling the globe. Even though I'm an 'on the road' photographer, or whatever, it wasn't my big dream. I was a homebody. And so it's peculiar that it's become such a large part of my life. What that hashtag speaks to is that what I thrive on in travel is the loneliness. It's not going out and seeing all the sites, it's being in my hotel room and the profound loneliness that I still experience. When I can tap into it in a non-destructive way, it can make for 'good songwriting' essentially.

Whether it's poetry, literary ephemera, quotations or love letters, what first led you to pair your photographs with words?

I think that we naturally use verbal language in conjunction with images. I'll bring it back to a platform like Instagram, actually. Although it might be a photographic medium, there was also no question it was

going to have captions—that those captions would play a huge role in our engagement. Words and images can and should function together—it seems quite natural to do so. I've been playing with different weights on the scales of that balance. How far can you go in one way or the other before it overwhelms the experience?

I recently revisited your one-off magazine project Paris, Minnesota—pairing the ostentatious runways of fashion week with the strip malls of suburbia. What led you to lay both locations side by side? Do you feel a sense of responsibility in picturing the Midwest?

What happened there was a practical thing. I took on the challenge to do this full fashion magazine of my own photographs through the Paris office of Magnum. But I didn't really know what I wanted to do. They had me start in Paris and I felt so out of my element. On the first day I went to this fashion show and I'm like, "What am I doing here?" I wanted to bring that quality to the work, so that's why I had the idea of doing this inverse shoot photographing Minnesota. Do I feel responsibility? I definitely feel of this place. I have always lived here and I'm highly aware of being from here, particularly as I travel. At the same time I've always struggled with photographing Minnesota. There's a few pictures from here in *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, and there's obviously *Paris, Minnesota*, but there's never been a completely explicit project. I've always wanted to do it but it's never worked thus far. Maybe someday.

You've talked about your own instinct to escape the social world and retreat to a cave. Do you still have that hermetic streak?

It's takes different forms at different times but, oh yeah, absolutely. Now it's actually more in a spiritual sense that I have a desire to retreat. It's less about getting away from society's ills and more about renewal. I dream about it for sure, but I know it doesn't work.

We spoke about loneliness earlier, in relation to travel. That word is so often associated with your practice. But it doesn't manifest in a single form. There's the defiant loneliness of mothers of marines shot for The New York Times, the indulgent loneliness of Herman's Bed (2002). Each subject is discrete in their isolation. I wonder, given all that we've spoken about, what you make of the idea of American individualism as it currently stands?

How can one not talk about loneliness? It's inevitable. The experience of consciousness itself has a certain amount of loneliness within it. It's like all these activities are going on inside of my skull and I cannot share all of it with anyone and we're all going to die alone! And then you come to the question of American individualism. What that phenomenon does is it takes the fact that consciousness is inherently lonely and valorises it while downplaying the other kinds of communal consciousness that can be experienced. I'm so of this culture and haven't experienced as much of those other forms of living. It happens that photography works well in romanticising the solitary. I think it's somewhat problematic, to be honest. Going on a march or singing in a choir is maybe healthier than making sad photographs of people in the woods. [Laughs.] But I am what I am.

In a new project, which took the artist a full year, Alec Soth photographed subjects in their homes and interior spaces, travelling across the US, UK, Europe and Eastern Europe. The resulting book, I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating, will be released by MACK on March 15. An accompanying exhibition opens at Weinstein Hammons Gallery, Minneapolis on 15 March, Looek Gallery, Berlin on 16 March, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York on 21 March and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco on 23 March. On 28 March, Two Rivers: Joachim Brohm / Alec Soth opens at NRW Forum, Düsseldorf.

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SELECTED WORKS BY ALEC SOTH IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Tricia and Curtis, 2005

Fort Jefferson Memorial Cross, 2002

Damien Echols on Death Row, 2005

Frankie, Ferriday, Louisiana, 2002

Kym, Polish Palace, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2000

Kai. New Orleans, 2018

Dottie. Denver, Colorado, 2013

Herman's Bed, Kenner, Louisiana, 2002

Miss Model contestants. Cleveland, Ohio, 2012

Anna. Kentfield, California, 2017

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Kai. New Orleans and *Anna. Kentfield* courtesy Sean Kelly, New York

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