

Alec Soth's Journey: Materiality and Time

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Introduction

The photographer Alec Soth is known for series of images and publications that encapsulate his travels through time and place within the American landscape. Each grouping of photographs uses a specific medium and geographical orientation in order to explore unique journeys and themes, such as the loneliness and banality of strangers in a public park, religion and debauchery in the Mississippi Delta, and the isolation of hermits in the valleys of rural Montana. Yet how are we to understand the place of these smaller journeys within Soth's larger artistic career? How are these publications and series connected to one another, and how do they evolve and change? Here, I will consider these questions as they relate to the specific materials within Soth's work. Using material properties as a framework illuminates the way in which each series illustrates these specific themes, and also how each grouping of images holds a significant place within the artist's larger photographic oeuvre.

Throughout Alec Soth's career, his movement between mediums has evolved in a manner that mirrors the progression of themes and subject matter within his larger body of work as a whole. From his earliest photographic forays in black and white film to his most recent digital video projects, Soth creates images that depict a meandering passage

through time and place.¹ His portraits, still lifes, and landscapes work together to suggest what one might call a stream of conscious wandering. The chronological progression of materiality in his works, from early black and white photography to large format 8x10 color images to more recent explorations in digital photography and film, illuminates the way in which each medium is used to tell a story of temporality and loneliness within the American landscape. Considering the material evolution and the larger implications of these choices will help to place each series within a larger context; the journey of the artist himself.

The term “materiality” can be defined in several ways in relation to Soth’s work. Primarily, this expression refers to the qualities of the camera and the film itself; the artists conscious choices of medium and format. This term also pertains to the manner in which these formats illustrate different physical characteristics of the subject matter. For example, an analysis of large format photographs will consider the ways in which the dense nature of the film allows the viewer to see the wrinkles in a woman’s clothing or the stray wisps of a man’s uncombed hair. Considering the physicality depicted in each image will reveal the passage of time, and also inform the way in which Soth’s journeys suggest the deterioration and imperfections of the subject and their surroundings. These issues of materiality, in both medium and subject matter, will be used as a framework to chronicle how Soth effectively tells a story of movement and the passage of time.

The journey created by Soth in his photographic projects is not a linear form, but rather a winding path of themes, subjects and mediums. Images within each project are not

¹ Soth, Alec, Siri Engberg, Geoff Dyer, and Alec Soth. *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2010. Print

linked together by a singular theme, but rather by each image's place within the journey through time and place. Each photograph resonates with other images throughout the group, through subject matter, landscape or theme. Feelings and themes that present themselves at the beginning of a publication invariably recur throughout the entire series, uniting the photographs into a cohesive whole. Further still, the pervasive feelings of banality and themes of isolation or connection within the American landscape return in cycles across Soth's career. His choice of medium proceeds in a similarly cyclical and meandering movement. Just as Soth returns to familiar themes from projects past, he also revisits previous materials in order to convey new motifs. In both theme and materiality, he does not proceed in a straight-line path, but rather returns again and again to these recurrent subjects, motifs, and formats.

Early Work: Large Format Black and White Photography

Alec Soth's own journey began in 1969 in the heart of the Midwest - Minneapolis, Minnesota. Soth ventured away from Middle America momentarily, attending Sarah Lawrence College in New York, and receiving his BFA in 1992. During this formative period, Soth initially concentrated on painting, and later earthworks and filmmaking before finding his place as a photographer.² A lecture at his college by color photographer Joel Sternfeld initially sparked Soth's interest in the medium.³ Sternfeld was primarily interested in capturing the beauty and banality of the American landscape through large

² Engberg, Siri. "Welcome to Utopia." *Alec Soth's America*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2010: 40.

³ Engberg, Siri. 40.

format 8x10 color photographs.⁴ Soth was fascinated by the way in which Sternfeld's images could document movement through the physical American landscape.⁵ The impact of the lecture moved Soth to embark on his first major photographic effort in 1991, which captured images from his first journey along the Mississippi River.

Following this initial photographic expedition, many new projects emerged in rapid sequence. After Soth's college graduation in 1992, he embarked on a project entitled *Perfect Strangers*, which unsurprisingly captured the artist's perceptions of strangers that he encountered in his wanderings through public space.⁶ This small grouping of portraits explored Soth's initial interest in the perennial themes of loneliness and banality in Midwestern America.

An untitled black and white image from this project depicts a middle-aged man standing outside in a park smoking a cigarette on a cold day (Figure 1).⁷ The portrait shows the upper half of the subject as he stands against the empty and barren landscape of the public park. In the background, a vacant sidewalk cuts across the grass in front of a patch of stark, leafless trees. The slightly overweight man wears a bulky overcoat and jeans; his face is framed by oversized wire frame spectacles. In his right hand he loosely grasps an almost spent cigarette, while he carries what appears to be some sort of cassette player on his left. The man's boyish side swept hair and snugly fitting backpack add a sort of awkward incongruence to the picture, contrasting with his middle age.

⁴ Sternfeld, Joel, Kerry Brougher, and Andy Grundberg. *American Prospects*. New York: DAP, 2006. Print.

⁵ Engberg, Siri. "Welcome to Utopia." *Alec Soth's America*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2010: 39.

⁶ Engberg, Siri. 40.

⁷ Soth, Alec, Siri Engberg, Geoff Dyer, and Alec Soth. *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2010. Print

The image "Untitled", as well as the entire *Perfect Strangers* series, was photographed exclusively in large format 4x5 black and white film. Soth undoubtedly began working with larger photographic formats due to his interest in the 8x10 work of Joel Sternfeld.⁸ The way in which Sternfeld used large format film to render precise details of the American landscape is paralleled in the way Soth captured finite details of the subject matter in "Untitled." The use of larger negatives enabled Soth to document the descriptive details of the portrait; from the creases in the man's jeans to the smoldering ash of his cigarette and the stray wisps of his unkempt hair.

While Soth adapted the larger format of Sternfeld, he moved away from his earlier use of color film. Instead Soth chose to create black and white images. In the case of *Perfect Strangers*, the lack of color adds to the sober, banal nature of the images. In "Untitled", the monochromatic landscape contributes to the gloomy, lonely tone of the subject and landscape; without color, the austere trees and desiccated grass of the public park appear all the more cold and bleak.

Within Soth's artistic career, the portrait of the middle-aged man exemplified the place from which the artist would embark on his journey, and from which his other modes and materialities would evolve. In *Perfect Strangers*, one can glimpse the beginnings of Soth's more developed artistic mode. Soth effectively appropriated the qualities of the large format camera to illustrate meticulous details. The wrinkled clothing and awkward appearance of the subject as well as the leafless trees of the landscape hint at feelings of loneliness and isolation that Soth would explore with further depth in consequent projects.

⁸ Soth, Alec. "FAQ: Why Do You Use an 8x10 Camera?" Web log post. *Alec Soth's Archived Blog*. 17 Sept. 2006. Web. 3 Oct. 2011.

Although the *Perfect Strangers* series did suggest travel through public space, its organization as a journey was not fully developed. Soth organized the series thematically as a grouping of portraits within a public park. “Untitled” worked well as a singular image to convey the loneliness and material imperfections of the subject, yet the images as a group were only weakly related under the theme of “stranger”. They did not work together to tell a more over-arching story. As Soth’s style continued to develop, he would reject these types of straightforward thematic organization in favor of meandering, stream of consciousness connections between images. In his subsequent works, he would also continue to expand upon and elaborate the ways in which he describes the journey, moving from smaller travels like those within a public park, to larger travels across the entire country. Closer analysis of the material properties of his consequent projects will help to illuminate the ways in which the journey and materiality have changed and evolved.

Large Format Color Publications: *Sleeping by the Mississippi*

Following the *Perfect Strangers* series and several subsequent projects created in the 4x5 black and white photographic mode, Soth began work on a new group of images based on travels along the Mississippi River. These photographs, all created using large format 8x10 color negatives, eventually became Soth’s first major monograph, entitled *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.⁹ The photographs within the series captured images of downtrodden Middle America from the origins of the river in Soth’s native state, meandering downward through the Deep South. Through deserted, muddy landscapes of

⁹ Engberg, Siri. “Welcome to Utopia.” *Alec Soth’s America*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2010: 40.

the Mississippi, portraits of prisoners in Louisiana, and scenes of abandoned and deteriorating bedrooms, Soth explored the motifs of religion, sleep and decay. These images were not connected through a singular theme, like *Perfect Strangers*, but rather each image was related to the next as a stage in the artist's wandering movement. Published in 2004, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* was created using a similar type of large format view camera as that employed in Soth's earliest work. Here, the departure from black and white imagery to intense color marked a significant new direction in his artistic journey.

While the material differences between the black and white *Perfect Strangers* series and *Sleeping by the Mississippi* are illuminated throughout the entire monograph, a closer examination of specific images helps to illustrate the reasons why Soth transitioned to a new mode, and how these new formats are used to illustrate his desired narrative. In early 2000, Soth photographed Adelyn, a young, redheaded woman standing outside of a New Orleans church on Ash Wednesday (Figure 2).¹⁰ In the bust portrait, the subject does not stare directly at the camera, but instead looks upward to her right, her head marked with the traditional ashen cross received at Catholic Mass during the first day of Lent. In the closely cropped image, Adelyn wears a brightly patterned halter-top, her visible tattoos, piercings and unnaturally garish red hair create an engaging contrast with the theme of religious reverence suggested by the forehead ashes.

In the context of this particular image, and also within the entire monograph, Soth continued to work with a camera similar to the one used in his earlier black and white work. During his initial photographic endeavors, large format film served as the ideal

¹⁰ Soth, Alec, Patricia Hampl, and Anne Tucker. *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. Guttingen, Ger.: Steidl, 2004. Print.

medium to create the finely detailed clarity of images like "Untitled." After successfully capturing smaller journeys, such as a walk through a park in the *Perfect Strangers* series, sustaining a similar format was a logical choice for Soth's first larger project.

Additionally, Soth's interest in the large format negative and view camera came from the way in which the unwieldy and time-consuming photographic process allowed for a more comfortable relationship between photographer and subject. In earlier work such as "Untitled", and also in the portrait of Adelyn, the subjects are visibly relaxed. The time that passed while Soth set up his tripod, staged the pose of the subject, and changed the negative allowed both subject and photographer to become comfortable in the situation. Although Adelyn and the artist were also "perfect strangers" in the same sense as Soth's relationship to the middle-aged man, her relaxed down-sloping shoulders and composed upward glance indicate a casual moment amidst the jostle of the New Orleans streets.

While the series was created in a familiar large format photographic mode, this publication represented two significant shifts in format. Instead of using 4x5 monochromatic negatives, Soth quadrupled the size of the negative to 8x10, and also used richly detailed color film. By using an even larger negative, greater levels of clarity were conveyed within the images. When asked why he had chosen to work in this format, Soth remarked that his preference reflected the, "resolution and total purity of the negative" used in the 8x10 view camera¹¹ The high resolution and fine grain of the large format negative are expressed in the printed image of Adelyn. Although the original positive print is quite large, measuring 40x50 inches in size, the grain of the negative is practically

¹¹ Soth, Alec. "FAQ: Why Do You Use an 8x10 Camera?" Web log post. *Alec Soth's Archived Blog*. 17 Sept. 2006.

invisible to the viewer; one is able to take in every minute detail, from the freckles on her arm to the texture of the ash upon her forehead.¹²

Although the ability to capture greater detail was an important aspect of this new material, it was Soth's shift into color film that marked the most substantive change. The *Perfect Strangers* series allowed Soth to work with large format 4x5 black and white negatives, yet he still appreciated the ways in which his former professor Joel Sternfeld, and other artists like Stephen Shore captured slices of the American landscape using 8x10 color images.¹³ Perhaps inspired by the work of his predecessors, or perhaps merely interested to try something new, there is no doubt that Soth's material choices effectively conveyed the character of the Mississippi River and its inhabitants. From vibrant images of the New Orleans Streets to the lush green banks of the river's landscape to the fiery hue of Adelyn's hair, the use of color allowed Soth to employ a new type of material quality in order to illustrate the themes of religion, rebellion, and loneliness.

The development of a wandering method of artistic practice, and the theme of the journey marked a shift in focus which would continue to remain an integral part of Soth's work. Visually, these artistic processes and themes were made real through the physical, material quality of the images. His affinity for this material likely stemmed from the fact that it worked so successfully to convey the narrative of wandering through both the rich coloration and high level of detail. It is difficult to imagine the portrait of Adelyn without the shockingly red hair, or brashly colored dress. Soth selected a quotation from fellow

¹² Soth, Alec, Siri Engberg, Geoff Dyer, and Alec Soth. *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2010. Print: 200

¹³ Soth, Alec. "FAQ: Why Do You Use an 8x10 Camera?" Web log post. *Alec Soth's Archived Blog*. 17 Sept. 2006. Web. 3 Oct. 2011. <<http://alecsothblog.wordpress.com/2006/09/17/faq-why-do-you-use-an-8x10-camera/>>.

large format photographer Stephen Shore in order to describe his affinity for colored images: "Color film is wonderful because it shows not only the intensity, but the color of the light."¹⁴ In the case of "Adelyn", the image contains not only the contrasts of shadow and sunlight that we saw in Soth's black and white portraits, but also the subtleties and variations in hue. The way in which light cast colored shadow upon her upwards glance makes her appear almost Madonna-like, adding another layer or religious symbolism to the image.

Large Format Color Publications: *NIAGARA*

Within this same material framework, Soth published his second monograph entitled *NIAGARA* in 2006. Like *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, *NIAGARA* considered the recurrent theme of travel. The still lives, portraits, and landscapes within the series worked together to suggest a meandering journey.¹⁵ This photographic passage, however, took place within a different context. Here, the artist's journey captured images from Niagara Falls, the honeymoon capital of days past. Photographs within the publication depicted the interiors and exteriors of decaying hotels, portraits of newlyweds and their families, crumpled love letters, and images of the Falls themselves.

Due to the similarities in format between *NIAGARA* and *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, the material qualities of each image illuminated the narrative in a familiar way. In the image "Melissa", for example, the vibrant colors and decisive details of the 8x10 negative

¹⁴ Soth, Alec. "Corking the Camera." Web log post. *Alec Soth's Archived Blog*. 11 June 2007. Web. 3 Oct. 2011. <<http://alecsothblog.wordpress.com/2007/06/11/corking-the-camera/>>.

¹⁵ Engberg, Siri. "Welcome to Utopia." *Alec Soth's America*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2010: 40.

created a similar effect to the portrait of Adelyn (Figure 3).¹⁶ This image, from 2005, depicts a young woman sitting outside a hotel exterior, wearing a bridal gown. She sits in a pink plastic and metal chair, her hands folded across her lap as she stares directly at the camera with a calm, but seemingly emotionless expression. The bride is in full regalia, with manicured nails, white dress, an elaborate updo and veil. Yet, the image of bridal beauty is undermined through closer examination of details. The clarity of the view camera captured the imperfections in the scene; her wrinkled dress and the stained pavement of the hotel walkway suggest cracks in the facade. Similarly to the way the in which Adelyn's mark of religious repentance was undermined by her rebellious appearance, Melissa's pure white bridal accoutrements are contradicted by the wrinkles of the gown and the dinginess of her surroundings.

The format of the camera was used in conjunction with the imperfect material qualities of the subject matter to suggest the passage of time and decay, the overarching themes of loneliness, as well as *NIAGARA*-specific motifs such as love, marriage and Niagara Falls. Melissa is alone in her chair, suggesting a wedding through her attire, yet completely separate from her betrothed, or from any typical scenes of marriage. The physical deterioration of Melissa and her surroundings is emphasized by her singularity and isolation within the hotel landscape.

Alec Soth's large format publications, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and *NIAGARA*, represented a significant shift in material qualities, as well as an important position within the artist's journey. In the maturation of Soth's artistic process, and themes of wandering and isolation were mirrored by the progression of materials and shift into large format

¹⁶ Engberg, Siri. "Welcome to Utopia." *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* (2010): 39-51.

color photography. Both the clarity of detail and the vibrancy of color afforded by the 8x10 negative allowed Soth to create deeply engaging portraits, landscapes, and still lifes that conveyed the feelings of movement and travel in two widely different contexts.

Broken Manual: Large Format Color Images and the Return to Black and White Photography

Following several smaller publications in the 8x10 color format, Soth embarked on his most recent monographic work entitled *Broken Manual*. The book of photographs published near the end of 2010, was a collaboration of images and text between Soth, and writer Lester B. Morrison.¹⁷ Morrison was in fact an alter ego of Soth, who posed as a reclusive hermit. Within the monograph, Morrison wrote a section of text, which instructs the reader on how to escape from today's modern world.¹⁸ The manual included images of hermits in their retreats, isolated rural landscapes, and the interiors and exteriors of secluded domiciles. Photographs within the book were punctuated by Lester's step-by-step instructions for how to "make the break" and live life in isolation from larger society.¹⁹

Thematically the photographic sequence of *Broken Manual* documented two central subjects, the hermit himself and his place of retreat. Soth's portraits of hermits varied widely, from a closely cropped, blurred black and white image of Roman "the nocturnal hermit", to a brilliantly colored, crisp, wide-angle view of "the Arkansas Cajun's backup

¹⁷ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth. *Broken Manual*. Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2010. Print.

¹⁸ Soth, Alec. "Dismantling My Career." Interview by Bartholomew Ryan. *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* 2011: 136-47. Print.

¹⁹ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth.

bunker” set against a dense forest landscape²⁰. His images of place were equally variable in scope, depicting the intimate interior space of the retreat, the crumbling exterior of rural shelters, and intensely colored photos of the natural landscape.

Materially, *Broken Manual* also included a number of different mediums and photographic techniques. In the production of this volume, Soth continued to use large format color film, but also returned to black and white imagery. He created crisply detailed black and white landscapes and still lifes similar to those from the beginnings of his career, but also used black and white film in new ways through blurred and distorted monochromatic portraits.

In a more general sense, Soth’s return to black and white imagery and experimentations with blurred portraiture may be attributed to a variety of factors affecting him at the high point of his artistic journey. As Soth’s rise to fame as an artist paralleled the publication of *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and *NIAGARA*, he became known primarily for his large format color portraits. Instead of running the risk of stasis within this particular medium, he pressed forward in his journey and material evolution, shifting into new interpretations and depictions of previous themes. When speaking on his motivations behind *Broken Manual* Soth mentioned that is shift in subject matter was motivated by weariness with previous subjects and themes.²¹ Instead of becoming trite, Soth sought to further explore new themes of loneliness, brokenness, and individualism.²² While the monograph was still largely organized and related to the idea of the journey and

²⁰ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth. *Broken Manual*. Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2010. Print.

²¹ Soth, Alec. "Dismantling My Career." Interview by Bartholomew Ryan. *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* 2011: 136-47. Print.

²² Soth, Alec. 136-47.

movement, new concepts of seclusion and isolation in relation to hermits were also explored.²³

Since *Broken Manual* was marked by a shift in subject matter that stemmed from Soth's fatigue with more traditional portraiture of previous publications, it made sense that he might revisit and bring in new materials to convey these new ideas. The photographs of hermits and their surroundings explored some of the darkest themes within Soth's career, and the subject matter necessitated varying materials in order to convey moods and themes of isolation. By incorporating B&W and imprecisely focused images with large format color photography, he was able to use different material qualities to communicate the idea of retreat from the world at large.

Soth's photographs of hermits in *Broken Manual*, including "N., Georgia", represented the ways in which the artist conveyed new themes through his continued use of large format color photography (Figure 4). We see that N. is a bearded hermit, dressed in a long black robe and hat amidst the expansive forest landscape.²⁴ Within the dominant verticality of the trees, it is almost difficult to spot him, as he leans against a tree trunk with hands clenched at his sides, his eyes closed.

Here, the artist used the 8x10 view camera in order to capture the rich yet subtle colors, and dense detail of the image. This format was able to communicate the immense nature of the forest retreat, and also the subtle beauty of the landscape. The viewer is able to see each muted variegation in color throughout the forest, as the dark brown of the foreground gives way to the sunlit trees in the mid-ground, and finally the pale blue sky

²³ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth. *Broken Manual*. Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2010. Print.

²⁴ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth.

near the top of the composition. The detailed beauty of the sylvan landscape is simultaneously picturesque and tranquil, yet the portrait of the bizarre outcast beneath the trees suggests a sense of loneliness that also pervades the forest.

In this case, the choice of large format photography to capture the lives of hermits in *Broken Manual* might also be related back to the nature of the view camera itself. As discussed in relation to “Untitled”, “Adelyn”, and “Melissa”, the obtuse view camera demanded patience from both the photographer and subject, which ultimately created a more relaxed image. In his images of solitary, isolated figures, the performance of the photographic process added validity to the project and established trust. Soth was not just a civilian, exploiting the peculiarities of society’s freaks through candid snapshots; the large view camera legitimated his place as an artist. The subject realized the seriousness of the project and was allowed time to relax in the company of Soth. The resulting portraits offer the viewer an intimate glimpse into an unknown, isolated vision of America.

Another image from *Broken Manual*, entitled “Frank’s View” was a dramatic departure in materiality and style from 8x10 color photographs such as “N., Georgia (Figure 5).” The former is a black and white image that depicts the artist’s view of a wintery landscape from the vantage point of an upper story hotel room window.²⁵ The transparent ruffled curtains surrounding the pane and crackled paint of the windowsill frame the composition. The edge of the window in the foreground is in clear focus, forming a darker, grey edge around the lighter, blurry scene outside of the hotel. The view outside is hazy, yet one can make out indistinct architectural and natural forms. This outlook encompasses a section of a town, with a cluster of boxy buildings and chimneys in a valley beneath a

²⁵ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth. *Broken Manual*. Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2010. Print.

mountain range. The hills and homes are covered in a lighter shade of cloudy white, suggesting a recent snowfall.

“Frank’s View” simultaneously evoked the ever-present ideas of travel and wandering that permeate most of Soth’s imagery, as well as the more specific themes of retreat suggested by *Broken Manual*. This image represented a specific moment in Soth’s own artistic journey, one instant within his cross-country voyage to document hermits and their places of retreat. Although the image is sequenced between an image of Eric Rudolph’s place of arrest in Murphy, North Carolina, and a deserted street scene in Nome, Alaska, the explicit location of the window view is never revealed to the spectator.

Soth was able to clearly illustrate his own ideas of wandering and seclusion through the window view, but this type of image also served as an allusion to Robert Frank, a primary artistic influence on his photographic work. The modern image bears a nearly identical resemblance to Robert Frank’s 1956 photograph from a window in Butte, Montana (Figure 6). Frank depicted the same boxy buildings, the same valley and mountains, in the same black and white style. In Frank’s work however, the artist focused on the town itself, and the gauzy curtains form a blurry frame for the work. The focus has been inverted, yet compositionally, the works are nearly alike. Soth even alluded to Frank directly in the title of the work, “Frank’s View.”²⁶

Soth’s fascination with Frank stemmed from an interest in a similar subject matter, American people, and also through Frank’s ability to simultaneously convey narrative and mystery in his work.²⁷ Soth interpreted this photograph in a broader context of Frank’s

²⁶ Morrison, Lester B., and Alec Soth. *Broken Manual*. Saint Paul: Little Brown Mushroom, 2010. Print.

²⁷ Soth, Alec. "The Art of Speculation." Web log post. *Little Brown Mushroom Blog*. 2 Oct. 2011. Web. 3 Oct. 2011. <<http://littlebrownmushroom.wordpress.com/2011/10/02/the-art-of-speculation/>>.

seminal catalogue, *The Americans*, the words of Jack Kerouac, and the biographical history of the artist. He was able to understand the imagery from the window, and speculated about its meaning based on his own background knowledge and perspective. In regards to this image, he remarked, "the intentions of the photographer might not be recorded, but their speculation is essential to the experience of the work."²⁸ In his own photograph, Soth asked viewers to practice a similar exercise. On it's own, "Frank's View" appears to be a simple scene of urban and natural landscape framed by a shabby window, yet in the context of Soth's motivations within *Broken Manual*, and the prevalence of the journey theme throughout his career, the viewer can conjecture in the same way that Soth considered the work of Robert Frank in relation to larger history and themes.

Soth deliberately chose to imitate not only the composition of Frank, but also the material attributes of the image. He shifted away from his typical large format 8x10 color photography, and instead adapted the black and white style of Frank. In both of the images, the choice of black and white film added to the feelings banality and isolation. The grey, snowy town lacks the rich, dense coloration typically used by Soth in his publications. Instead, it feels drab, and monochromatic.

Although the images are very visually similar, they were in actuality composed using different photographic methods. Frank's image was taken with a small, lightweight 35 mm camera and black and white film, while Soth also used black and white film, but with a large format view camera.²⁹ The material choices of each artist affected the narratives they were able to convey and their general aesthetic. Working with 35 mm film, Frank was able to

²⁸ Soth, Alec. "The Art of Speculation." Web log post. *Little Brown Mushroom Blog*. 2 Oct. 2011. Web. 3 Oct. 2011. <<http://littlebrownmushroom.wordpress.com/2011/10/02/the-art-of-speculation/>>.

²⁹ Salvesen, Britt. "American History." *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* (2010): 104-11. Print.

take a large number of exposures in a short period of time, and photograph whenever he wanted, without the lengthy process of setting up the view camera. This allowed him to capture candid snapshots, moving objects, and many other subjects that were off-limits to Soth in his large format work. The style of Frank is generally described as a “snapshot aesthetic” in the sense that he was able to take snapshots at any moment of the day, capturing anything around him with his camera.³⁰ Soth’s view camera on the other hand, required “patience of composition”, and limited his subject matter to objects that can remain relatively still.³¹ It is interesting to note the ways in which these two mediums diverged to convey the exact same scene in a similar way. At closer consideration, the material differences are obviated. The mountains and details of “Butte, Montana” are not sharply focused, but rather gritty. Additionally, the grain of the film image adds a coarse texture to the image.³² The lack of precise details reflected Frank’s material choices and the snapshot mode. Conversely, “Frank’s View” by Soth captured every precise detail of the window, the screen, and the curtains. The minute physical details suggest the temporality of the scene; the decay of the hotel room as it exists now and as it existed in the time of Robert Frank.

As a whole, *Broken Manual* represented a period of transition and experimentation for the artist. Instead of using a single medium as in his two previous monographs, Soth referred back to earlier formats with large format black and white photographs. The book itself seemed to exist as a sort of experiment, playing with new forms of description such as written text, new themes such as withdrawal from society, and certainly new

³⁰ Dyer, Geoff. "Riverrun." *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* (2010): 79-83. Print.

³¹ Dyer, Geoff. 80.

³² Salvesen, Britt. "American History." *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* (2010): 104-11. Print.

juxtapositions of different mediums. Through *Broken Manual*, Soth challenged his legacy as simply a large format color portraitist by pushing his traditional themes and materials to other levels. As a stage in the artistic journey, *Broken Manual* was an important part of the wandering; through it's trials in theme and material it created new ways to convey narrative details, an idea which Soth expanded upon even further through video slideshows and digital films.

Continental Picture Show: Digital Images, Slideshows, and Video

In 2010, shortly following the photographic production of *Broken Manual*, Soth's material formats shifted considerably as he began working with digital photography, film, and video slideshow. While Soth experimented with filmmaking in the past, including amateur art school productions, and a short online video entitled "Glass Jars," the *Continental Picture Show* project signified the first time that the artist created a cohesive series of films for a broader audience.³³ The *Continental Picture Show* video series was part of the Opinionator section of the New York Times Online, and focused on the proverbial theme of travelling across America. Soth's contribution to the Opinionator consisted of four separate video pieces that each depicted a brief narrative from a different region of the American landscape.³⁴

Soth's shift into new types of digital mediums marked a continuation of the material exploration found within *Broken Manual*. While variations in format within *Broken Manual*

³³ Soth, Alec. *Little Brown Mushroom Blog*. 2010. Web. 5 Oct. 2011. <<http://vimeo.com/littlebrownmush/videos>>.

³⁴ Soth, Alec. "Opinionator – Alec Soth." *The New York Times* 12 Sept. 2010. *The New York Times Online*. Web. 20 Mar. 2011.

were defined by small, yet significant deviations in Soth's traditional large format photographic mode, these digressions were much more pronounced in the *Continental Picture Show*. Soth's feelings of material fatigue continued to persist, and were perhaps exacerbated following the publication of *Broken Manual*. Regarding this exhaustion, Soth remarked, "...My own pictures started feeling the same. I was burned out. So I started experimenting. I made little videos and used disposable cameras. I played. I stopped making big, formal, large-format pictures."³⁵ Similarly to *Broken Manual*, it was the artist's material fatigue that advanced the change in materiality. The *Continental Picture Show* was one of these experiments; a deviation from the formality of his traditional artistic practice and production.

The initial film in the *Continental Picture Show* series, "Ash Wednesday, New Orleans", "explores the cycles of sin and redemption in the aftermath of Mardi Gras", according to the *New York Times*.³⁶ The film begins in Soth's hotel room, as the artist contemplated the debauchery of the Mardi Gras holiday, before venturing out into the New Orleans Streets in the wee hours of the morning to photograph the destruction. The latter half of the video considers the themes of religious redemption on Ash Wednesday following the drunken revelry of Tuesday evening. Through the incorporation of digital film, text, audio components, and digital photography, Soth explored the motifs of sin, redemption, and the material implications of the passage of time.

As evidenced by Soth's photographic journey through the New Orleans streets, the transition into digital photography opened up new photographic subjects that were not

³⁵ Baker, Stacey. "How to Revisit an Iconic Photograph." *New York Times Magazine*. 23 Sept. 2011. Web. 5 Oct. 2011. <<http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/how-to-restage-an-iconic-photograph/>>.

³⁶ Soth, Alec. "Opinionator - Alec Soth." *The New York Times* 12 Sept. 2010. *The New York Times Online*. Web. 20 Mar. 2011.

previously accessible to him in his large format work. Use of a lightweight digital camera was in direct opposition to the bulky, time-consuming photographic process of the 8x10 or 4x5 view camera. As discussed in relation to *NIAGARA*, and *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, the process of setting up the view camera limited Soth to taking photographs of posed subjects, or relatively still inanimate objects and landscapes. With the digital camera, Soth was instead able to wander through the New Orleans streets, taking snapshots of anything around him. Consequently, the new material choices allowed Soth to convey the themes of the wandering journey using a radically different subject matter. Instead of focusing on still scenes of portraiture and landscape, Soth was able to capture candid action, or in this case the action's aftermath and destruction. Bird's eye photographs of refuse and incapacitated Mardi Gras revelers within the film were representative of the new ways in which the digital medium allowed Soth to document new subject matter.

In the middle of the video, the screen pans to a familiar face from Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* series. Here again, we see the same large format image of Adelyn taken ten years previously on Ash Wednesday in New Orleans and now reproduced within the context of the film. At first glance, the image is equally striking in this new framework, representing similar themes of redemption and reverence. In the case of the *Mississippi* Adelyn, the viewers assumed their own narratives, based on of the symbolism of the ashes as an indication of Catholic ritual and forgiveness from sin. Yet in *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, only part of Adelyn's story was revealed. We know that the photograph was taken on Ash Wednesday, and as an ashen cross marked the subject, we assumed that she had just participated in a Catholic Mass. However, the details of the video provide the spectator with additional information, which contradicts this narrative of repentance. A

section of text appears on the screen and the viewer learns that what we believed to be a mark of redemption was merely cigarette ashes smeared upon her forehead in the shape of the cross.

In the case of “Ash Wednesday, New Orleans”, the material qualities of the film and the video slideshow format were able to add new details to the story. Here, the addition of sound, expanded text, and moving picture were ways for engagement with the wandering journey that were unavailable in most of Soth’s previous works. The use of text revealed new ideas about the “Adelyn” image, and undermined the themes of religious reverence and assumptions of the viewer. Through digital media, Soth found new ways to create contradictory portraits that were simultaneously beautiful and temporal.

The ways in which Soth used digital media to engage more deeply with the themes of temporality and movement is evident in the section of the video immediately following the original image of Adelyn, which shows the subject ten years later (Figure 7). The video presents a brief shot of the subject, standing in front of the exact same wrought iron gates, yet this time she looks older, a bit sadder. She has the same curly red hair, but it is longer, less vibrant. She is dressed in somber black, and her forehead lacks the smudged cigarette ashes. In the clip, she slowly turns to face the camera, looking sadly into the lens, motionless save for her hair moving in the light wind and the blinking of her eyes.

While digital film clips like the one of Adelyn represented only a small portion of the actual “Ash Wednesday, New Orleans” video, Soth’s experiments with digital film were significant in the way they were used to add new descriptive details to the artist’s journey through New Orleans. In the film clip of Adelyn from 2010, she is hardly moving within the frame, yet the small details afforded by the use of film allow her to appear real, to exist as a

living, breathing person. In the photograph, Adelyn was merely one instant within the scope of the journey, but in “Ash Wednesday”, the viewer is able to see the subtle movement of her hair and the movement of her eyes as she turns her head and her lonely gaze meets the spectator.

The use of video and creation of digital slideshows were an important part of Soth’s artistic journey as a continuation and progression of his material experimentation in *Broken Manual*. Soth’s transition into digital media and incorporation of film opened up new ways and modes of communicating time-honored themes. Through the film as material Soth illustrated the motif of decay of his subject, in this case Adelyn. For the viewer, the passing of time that has occurred between the *Mississippi* journey and the wanderings of “Ash Wednesday” is made evident through the juxtaposition of large format photography and video.

Conclusion

From the *Perfect Strangers* series to *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and *NIAGARA* to *Broken Manual* and finally to “Ash Wednesday, New Orleans,” Alec Soth’s depictions of the theme of journey evolved both materially and thematically. In each stage of his artistic path, Soth’s conscious choice of medium incorporated the material qualities of the subject in order to convey unique visual descriptions of the landscape and journey. In the case of *Perfect Strangers*, Soth used precise details of the black and white film in order to suggest the isolation and physical imperfections of strangers. In *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, the artist’s material choices allowed him to depict the subject in even greater detail. Large format color photography provided Soth with the tools to fully develop his artistic mode, to

consider themes of religion through descriptive details in the portrait of Adelyn, and to connect photos within the publication by moving away from a thematic organization. In *NIAGARA*, Soth used the same medium to convey new ideas of love and decay. In the image of Melissa, the vivid detail and overcast coloration suggested isolation and imperfection in the deteriorating honeymoon capital. In *Broken Manual*, Soth's experimentations with old formats allowed him to pay homage to inspirations like Robert Frank, while his use of his traditional large format created surprisingly intimate portraits of hermits, a notoriously reclusive subject matter. Finally, in *Continental Picture Show*, further material experimentations in digital photography, text, and video permitted Soth to provide new types of narrative detail, and documented active scenes of sin and redemption through the instantaneity of the digital camera.

It is important to understand not only how Alec Soth used each format within a project to convey familiar themes and new motifs, but also why these materials evolved, and how these projects worked together to illustrate the journey of the artist himself. In each monograph or series, Soth's deliberate choice of format shaped the way in which the project developed. Between each different journey, he meandered between materials, returning to some and adapting new favorites. From *Broken Manual*, in which he returned to the familiar large format camera in order to create lushly detailed images of retreat and isolation to "Ash Wednesday, New Orleans" where Soth moved into digital photography out of a feeling of material fatigue, his choices were always motivated by a deliberate sense of wandering. While the final destination of Soth's journey remains to be seen, he will undoubtedly continue to wander; seeking meaning through the ways in which photographs

and digital media tell a story of beauty, movement, decay, and the passage of time in America.

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Appendix



Figure 1. - "Untitled"



Figure 2. - "Adelyn, New Orleans"



Figure 3. – “Melissa”

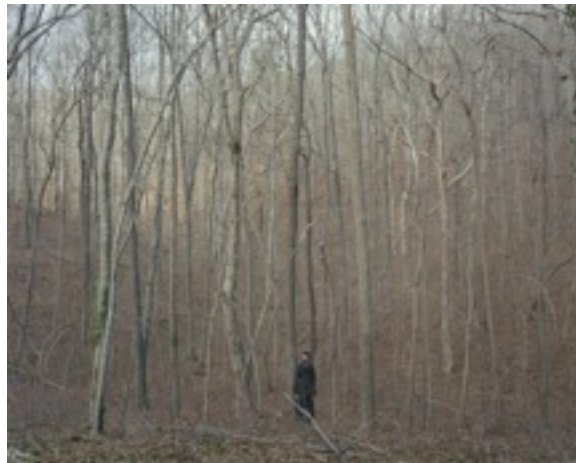


Figure 4. – “N., Georgia.”



Figure 5. – “Frank’s View”

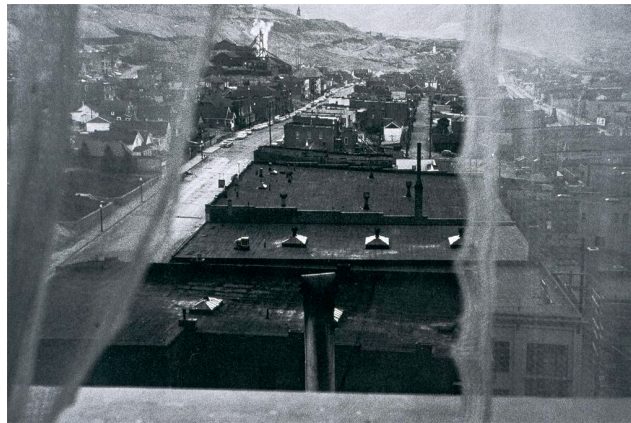


Figure 6. – “Butte, Montana, 1956”



Figure 7. – Film Still of Adelyn from “Ash Wednesday, New Orleans”