

Marta Gili and Alec Soth in Conversation

From Fashion Magazine by Alec Soth, published by Magnum Photos, 2007

Marta Gili – When I first saw your Minnesota fashion portraits they reminded me of how my mother used to dress my sister and I to go to church on Sundays: inexpensive home-made clothes, tailored by my mother herself, inspired by fashion clichés of the Sixties but trying to add her own fantasies into her designs. Some of the Minnesota teenagers and young couples you’ve photographed seem to wear both the dignity and mask of these celebrations of cultural consumption. But let’s start with the most obvious question: how did this fashion photography project come about? How do you relate the Minnesota and Paris images?

Alec Soth – It may be an obvious question but it’s a little tricky to answer. While *Fashion Magazine* has a single photographer-author, it’s still a magazine, not a book. So it doesn’t follow my usual mode of slow, solitary production. It’s collaboration. The ideas for the collaboration were formulated very quickly. I was approached by the folks at the Paris office of Magnum to work on this issue late last year. I immediately said yes. I was a huge fan of the previous two editions (by Martin Parr and Bruce Gilden) and was looking for an excuse to play with fashion. But when I agreed to the project, I didn’t have a strong sense of where it was going.

Initially, the concept behind the magazine was pretty weak. I guess it had something to do with fairy tales. The truth is that we didn’t have time for ideas. Fashion Week in Paris was upon us and we began a production whirlwind. I wasn’t thinking. I was just making pictures. After this initial shoot, I returned home to Minnesota and reviewed the photographs. I was happy with the images but disappointed with the conceptual backbone. I needed to find my voice in the project. But as someone utterly removed from the world of Parisian couture, how was I supposed to find my own voice? The more I thought about it, this sense of removal, this contrast between my world and Paris – this became the scaffolding to build the magazine.

M.G. – I think most people feel the same way without realizing. The fashion culture engages our phantasmagoria in such a subtle way that it certainly creates an illusion of freedom, a “real fairy tale”. For some people those tales remain a cause of celebration, for others they’re a cause of alienation, while many find them a refuge from the exhausting reality of the “real world”. Do you place your project in this borderline between representation and phantasmagoria?

A.S. – Yes, I love the idea of borderlines – of walking a tightrope. This is the best place to make pictures. I would never claim that this magazine is documentary photography. But I’m not really sure this is fashion photography either.

M.G. – How do you connect this project to the rest of your photography?

A.S. – I’m still sorting this out. Certainly the fact that it is a collaborative effort made on a tight deadline alters the way it should be read. Nonetheless, my fingerprints are all over these pictures. As I said, this is not a documentary project. The same can be said of my personal projects. When I took pictures in Niagara or along the Mississippi, I wasn’t really documenting those places. There is so much I left out. Niagara has millions of happy vacationing families and I didn’t photograph a single one. Likewise, I refrained from photographing skyscrapers along the Mississippi. I created my own Niagara and my own Mississippi. I’m creating my own fashion world with this magazine.

I often say that when I am making a portrait, I’m not “capturing” the other person. If the photograph documents anything, it is the space between the subject and myself. Something similar is at work with *Fashion Magazine*. I’m not really comfortable saying I know anything about Paris or its fashion world. And I suspect that most fashionable Parisians know just as little about Minnesota. What is interesting is the space between us.

My favourite example of this involves Chanel. In Paris, I photographed Karl Lagerfeld at the Grand Palais. In Minnesota, I photographed a girl with a Chanel shopping bag in front of Sally’s Beauty Shop. With this magazine, I’m trying to explore the distance between those two places.

M.G. – Would you make a distinction between a documentary photographer and a document maker?

A.S. – “Documentary photographer” seems a bit loaded – and a bit limiting. It suggests purity. I’m not pure. “Document maker” is less loaded, but I still wouldn’t say this is my ultimate goal. I just want to make something beautiful. And the most profound beauty is grounded in something real.

M.G. – For me, both document and documentary are grounded in the real. But whereas document generates a few meanings, documentary is always full of judgement. Words such as “transparency”, “reality” or “truth” are more related to document than documentary, which is connected with a certain construction of reality. “Beauty” is definitely a judgement, a pure state of mind, like melancholy....I definitely think that you are using documentary strategies to build a certain meaning: for instance “beauty”. The word “beauty”, by the way, is rarely used in the contemporary art field. How do you deal with it? How do you connect beauty with other issues?

A.S. – I’m not embarrassed to talk about beauty. But to explain what I mean, it might be easier to talk about a different medium. With narrative forms like film, for example, I think the first goal of the filmmaker should be to entertain the audience. I’m sure that many people find the term “entertainment” crass. But I don’t mean clowns and car chases. I’m just saying it is important to engage the audience – to bring them into the work. This isn’t to say there can’t be a higher achievement. After drawing you in, after entertaining you, there are those rare cinematic experiences that leave you changed. Perhaps when you leave the theatre you want to quit your job. Or call your Grandmother. Whatever. But this lofty achievement shouldn’t be the filmmaker’s first goal. Nobody wants to change his or her life after falling asleep in the theater.

The difference with the non-narrative media like photography is that “beauty” replaces “entertainment”. Again, beauty shouldn’t be understood as rainbows and puppies. I’m talking about a deep mix of creativity and craftsmanship that engages the viewer. Of course, fashion magazines are involved with beauty too. And I suppose they are trying to inspire change. But instead of causing you to quit your job, those pretty girls with handbags have you working overtime. The problem with the fashion magazine, and the industry as a whole, is that the understanding of beauty can be so flat

M.G. – Yes I agree with you that beauty is a very good tool for complicity but also for manipulation. Maybe this is one of the issues proposed by conceptual art, in the sense that its ideas are very strong but sometimes very difficult to connect with....Very cryptic, because in this case beauty is expressly avoided. The perfect complicity between idea and beauty could be the formula for a great work of art. Look at fashion, and the representation of fashion, for instance. Beauty in this case is a concept with strong political, social and cultural implications. The search of beauty is never innocent. I think that your images are not innocent either. Behind their indisputable beauty, they also breathe in a melancholic way to present the human condition. Do you agree?

A.S. – I have a hard time separating my sensibility from the inherent characteristics of the medium. Most photographs are made out of the desire to stop time. It is hard not to find something melancholic about this longing to possess and preserve the world. The act of photography strikes me as both desperate and utterly human. This relates to what I said previously about portraiture and the idea of photographing the space between the subject and myself. As an acknowledgement of that space, a photograph can’t help but be a small marker of alienation.

But let’s not go overboard with the moody philosophizing. In the end I’m trying to have fun and make something pretty. That must be some kind of affirmation.

M.G. – Which writers, photographers and filmmakers inspire you?

A.S. – The list is endless, but lately I draw more from poetry than anything else. For me it is the medium most similar to photography. I’m particularly drawn to 20th century American poetry. I learn a lot from the way these poets assemble images, incorporate vernacular and invent rhythm.

M.G. – I think it was Rilke who said that to write a good verse, a poet has to be able to forget memories and wait for them to come back in a different way. Do you think this is also true with photography?

A.S. – Absolutely. If I'd been asked to *Fashion Magazine* a decade ago, it would have been a disaster. I'm sure I would have been sucked into the fantasy world – the long legs, pouty lips and all that. I needed to be comfortable in my own eyes and my own experience before I could add anything to the genre.