

THE PROCESS

IN WHICH AN ARTIST DISCUSSES MAKING A PARTICULAR WORK

Alec Soth and Brad Zellar, *Three Valleys*

Through the lens of Twin Cities photographer Alec Soth, newlyweds, oilmen, homeless kids, and others become kings and queens of the everyday. His images could pass for stills from a Terrence Malick film, which is a pretentious way of saying that they're bittersweet and cinematic and offer no easy answers. Galleries and museums like him. So does the New York Times Magazine, which frequently taps him for features. In 2011, he and his friend Brad Zellar—a writer whose book of found photos of 1960s suburbia partly inspired the Coen brothers' film, *A Serious Man*—started a conceptual newspaper called the LBM Dispatch, published by Soth's Little Brown Mushroom LBM Press. Here, they discuss the *Three Valleys* edition, which chronicles a trip they took to the Silicon, Death, and San Joaquin valleys earlier this year. —Chris Clayton

THE BELIEVER: How did the *LBM Dispatch* come about?

ALEC SOTH: It was my birthday, and I called Brad and asked him to give me a present, and it was to do a newspaper assignment together. We picked up this community newspaper and chose this story about a runaway cat that had been living off a deer carcass near this freeway interchange. We had a blast chasing down that story.

BRAD ZELLAR: We started going around pretending to be a suburban newspaper photographer and writer. We had business cards and went to community events and Elks Lodges. We started following news stories and weird historical angles, going to town hall meetings. It was fun finding out a way to work with the pictures. Sometimes it was kind of fictional—sort of David Lynch meets *Lake Wobegon*. Other times it was more documentary-style. We had so much fun that Alec said, "Let's take this on the road." And then we went to Ohio and did the first Dispatch.

BLVR: The novelist Richard Ford has praised the *LBM Dispatch*, comparing it to the collaborations of Walker Evans and James Agee. How do you characterize the project?

AS: It's two guys out driving around, engaging with the world. Engaging with the real world is a form of journalism that is increasingly rare—and in that sense we're doing a kind of journalism. But we're not constrained by any traditional boundaries. There's a whimsy to it—it just goes where it wants to go, which is in the spirit of road photography.

BZ: It's a twenty-first century snapshot of American culture and regional life. That's kind of our model, but again, sometimes we create more of a mythical and dreamy feel and other times we tell the straight story. *Three Valleys* is sort of a combination of the two.

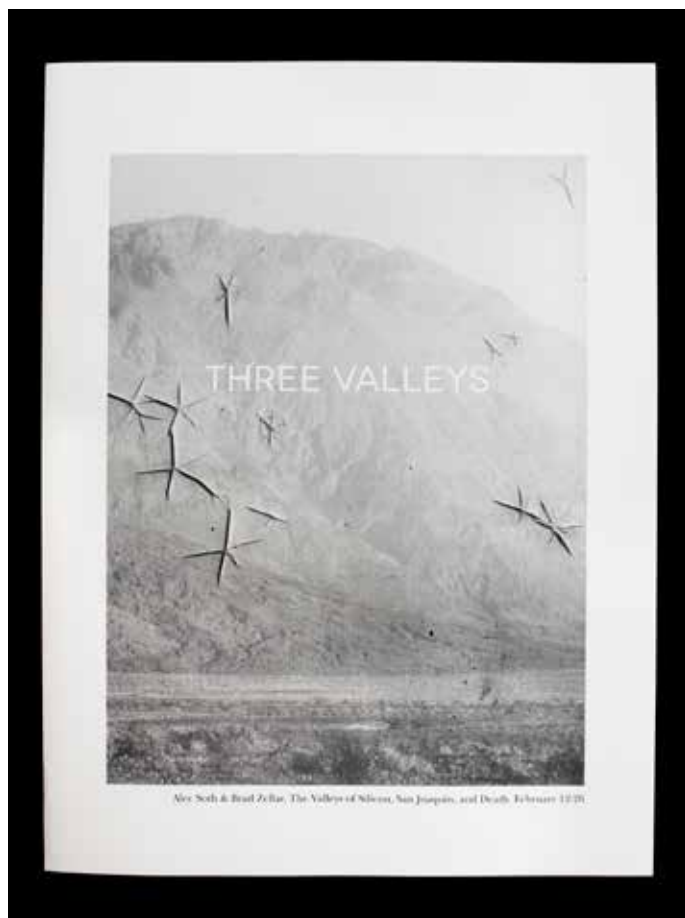
BLVR: What drew you to California for this edition?

AS: It started as a commission I got from SFMOMA to focus on Silicon Valley. I said to SFMOMA, "I'd like to do the commission and expand on it and travel to other places," and they were really great about this. So that was a funding source for *Three Valleys*. One could do just Silicon Valley, but to do only this alien subculture seemed odd. Then we got this idea of Silicon Valley to Death Valley, but that seemed too obvious. We added San Joaquin—this boomtown of another era—and that's what tied it together. By visiting Silicon then San Joaquin then Death—it was like this reverse march through time, backward into prehistory.

BLVR: You spent nineteen days in California and then designed, edited, and printed *Three Valleys* soon after returning home. Did you employ this in-and-out approach on purpose?

AS: What I love about the *Dispatch* is that everything is sped up. We're not dillydallying the way you do with a book for six months. I think there's an energy to working that way—it makes it more alive.

BLVR: *Three Valleys* contains images taken inside the Google and Facebook compounds. How did you gain access to these worlds, and what were they like?



AS: It was incredibly difficult to get into Google. It required knowing an art adviser there. And then we were given a tour, and it was made clear that this was rare access. As a photographer, that stressed me out—you don't see a lot of photos taken inside of Google and I didn't want to blow it. Our eyes were popping out everywhere we looked. It all kind of felt like Woody Allen's *Sleeper*—a future vision from years ago. And then I came upon a yoga instructor sitting in this white box of a room—that was a treat.

BZ: Nothing could prepare me for Google. It's like a monastery where people work seventeen hours a day. And just the scale of these places—they occupy something like seventy-five buildings on what used to be orchard and garden country.

BLVR: How did people respond when you approached them for *Three Valleys*?

AS: Incredibly well. This might sound corny, but it's my feeling about America that we've become so cynical. Everyone always says the country is all TGI Fridays, but you drive off the freeway and you go a couple miles and it's not TGI Fridays, and people are way more interesting than we give them credit for. You just scratch a little and everyone's kind of interesting, and if you show authentic interest in people, they respond to that. Like Stretch, this guy from the parachuting photo in Lodi—he was such a character. Brad approached him and suddenly we're learning that he's an Air Force veteran who's spent forty-five thousand hours in the air.

BLVR: Brad, how did you approach *Three Valleys* as a writer?

BZ: I read and research like crazy before each trip. We always have a plan going into each *Dispatch*, a list of people and places we want to visit, threads we want to follow, but we also veer offtrack. Every night in California I'd go back to my hotel room and process all these threads. I'd go over my notes and write a thousand words or two thousand words. It's not easy to process the discordant jumps from culture to culture that you see all over California. We'd go from Buck Owens's nightclub in Bakersfield to chasing down a Basque shepherd to being stuck in a dust storm in the desert. The real capper on this trip is we left Death Valley and came to this town, Lone, and the river was on fire. The river was literally burning—something about a desiccated salt flat. And I'd been reading the Bible the whole trip and thinking about that Meat Puppets song "Lake of Fire," and here we are in some Western town that looks straight out of the Yukon and the fucking river is on fire. How do you process that?

BLVR: And what was your approach, Alec?

AS: I use medium-format digital for these projects and the images are black and white. On a thematic level, halfway through the trips we usually figure out the stories we want each issue to tell. For *Three Valleys*, for me, it's about whiteness. This is a "white" project—the white of the cloud of the virtual space in Silicon Valley to the whiteout of the desert in Death Valley. Themes emerge organically. I'm looking for visual keys, and in this case one was the box shape—the garage in Palo Alto where Hewlett-Packard started, a homeless guy's cardboard box house in Tulare, that Google yogi.

BLVR: Talk about your collaborative process.

BZ: Alec and I have a weird mind-meld. We anticipate each other. I know the kinds of photos he's looking for, and sometimes he knows what I need, knows I have a great story and he needs to get a photo to go with it. And as a writer, I can help Alec get a great shot by distracting the subject. If they're paying too much attention to what he's doing, my job is to say, "Look at me, I'm the little duckie!" Almost every pic he's taking, I'm right there outside the

frame talking to the person.

AS: I do the image processing and editing at night while we're on the road, and then I upload the pics for Brad to weigh in. He sees those and he starts piecing the text around it—he's also thinking about his longer pieces and deciding when he's going to pair something with a quote or an excerpt from another writer. It's collaborative the entire time.

BLVR: For all of its focus on news and narrative, *Three Valleys* looks and reads like art. The paper stock is really nice, and the images and text have a deep, literary quality that you won't find in many newspapers. How important is that quality for this project?

AS: I'm seduced by the paper and the object, but I like that the *Dispatch* is more accessible than some of my other projects. Art people and non-art people seem to like it. It feels good to make something accessible.

BLVR: Do you have a favorite image or story from *Three Valleys*?

AS: One is the image of Brad in the dust storm. We saw this storm on the horizon and we chased it. And then it was there and then it wasn't, and suddenly we were in it and it was fucking unbelievable. Sand everywhere, inside your ears, but it was beautiful and purely visual.

BZ: The farmer who's the last man standing in the Silicon Valley. He won't sell his land. It looks like some place in the middle of the Mississippi Delta, but it's in the middle of Google with chickens and shit running around.

BLVR: What have you learned from your adventures?

BZ: When we first set out to do the *Dispatch*, we thought we'd find that real community and fellowship were suffering in the age of cyberspace. But it turned out the opposite is true. We've found all these small towns that are very self-contained and have active main streets. Alec and I are loners—and we're drawn to loners in our work—but it's good to know that you can still join a Moose Lodge if you need to. ★