

LISSON GALLERY

Contemporary Lynx
November 2018

CONTEMPORARY
LYNX



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin work in a studio near Spitalfields Market in Shoreditch, East London. They are professors of photography at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg and at The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague. Major awards include the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize in 2013. Their work is held in most important public and private collections.

They are not a regular artistic duo. They are cousins and as they have mentioned: 'We discovered after working together for twelve years that we're related.' Everything which surrounds them is connected. And this is a clue to their works. Everything is linked to everything. There is no truth and no falsehood, no right or wrong. There is no single author, even when they invite a specific artist to their project — the notion of authorship is blurred. They add more and more layers to show this endless list of connections and possibilities. There is no real end, no single point of view. Everything is changing, and so are we... If we can change our minds, maybe we can change a little bit more — something that is beyond us... Eventually everything flows, *panta rhei*, and nothing stands still.

To capture this moment, I spoke to Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin about photography, truth, falsehood, and the politics of the material.

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

STORYTELLERS

Dobromiła Błaszczyk: You often say that taking pictures doesn't interest you. You say that something must stand behind them. What is then the role of the visual side of your work and its status in comparison to the intellectual, content-related part?

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin: Are we allowed to change our minds?

DB: ...Haha, of course...

AB & OC: Taking and making pictures is interesting and the act has always been an important part of our practice. There is always a space between what you imagine an image will be like and the reality of what emerges when it is processed. It's this spark of contingency, the accidents and magic of image-making that is still very

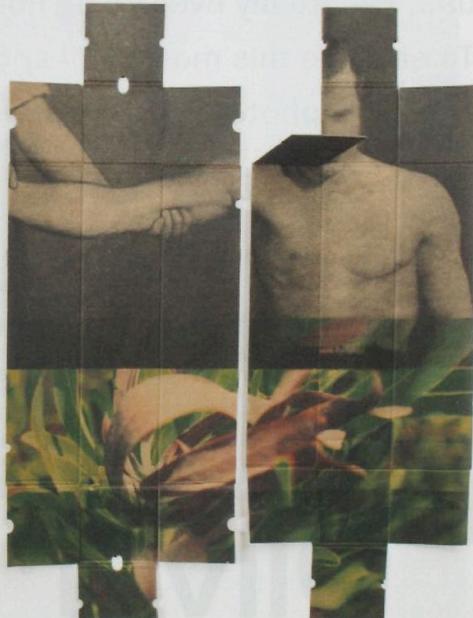
valuable to us. We are also not sure if it's helpful to distinguish between visual and intellectual work like you do. Images can be intellectual and ideas can be visual.

DB: In each of your stories, you enclose layers of contexts, links and connections. Why are you interested in adding layer upon layer in your projects? What is the purpose of all the footnotes around an image?

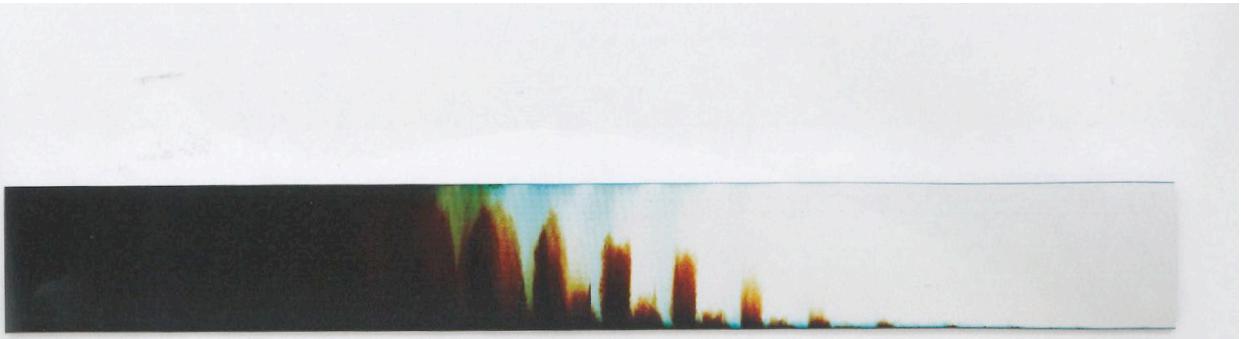
AB & OC: It's nice that you call our work *stories*, it feels good to imagine ourselves as storytellers. The stories have lots of footnotes because life is complicated. When we start investigating something it always seems to reveal more and more layers, like unpeeling an onion. We are excited by this complexity, by the strange links between seemingly



Broomberg & Chanarin, *Bondage the Knife Not the Wound*, 2018, UV print on cardboard © Broomberg & Chanarin, courtesy Lisson Gallery



ARTISTS



disassociated events and we are eager to share them. People have complained before that our work always has too many *ands*. What can we say, we're reluctant to just produce visual sound bites.

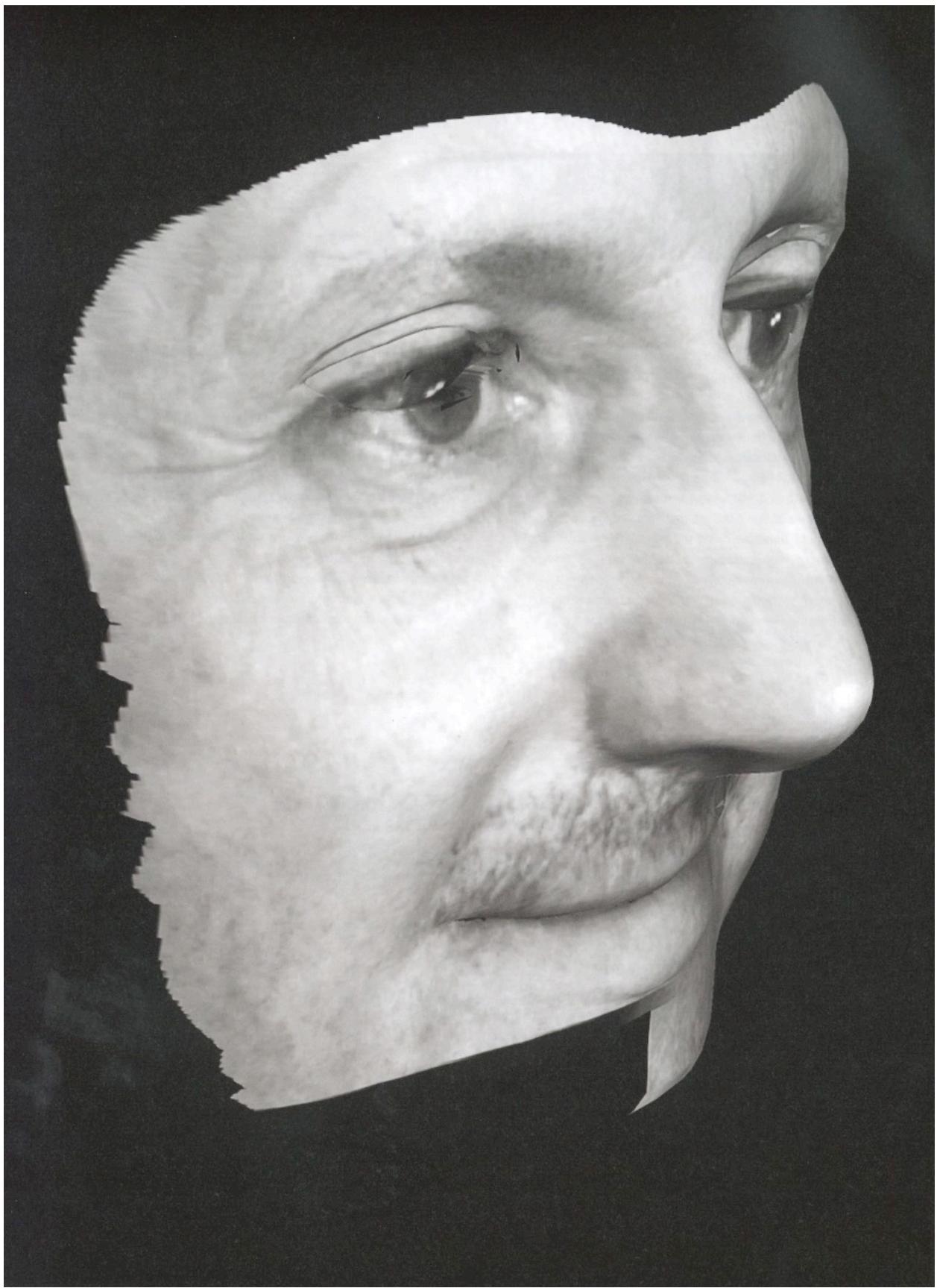
DB: Both of you are artists, curators, researchers, but also the founders of Chopped Liver Press which publishes and sells limited edition books and posters. Are you particularly attached to any of the roles?

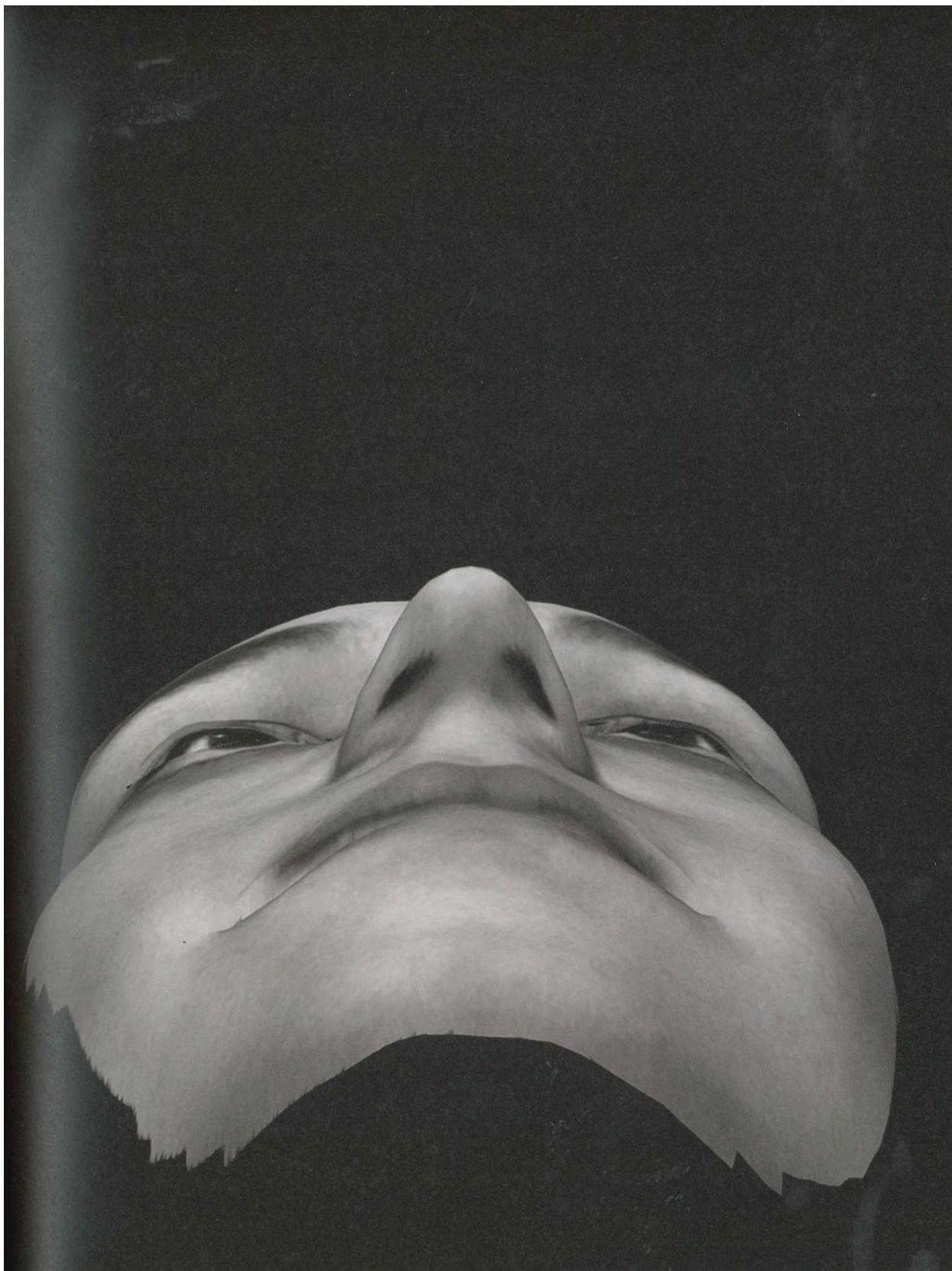
AB & OC: No, none of them. At the moment we are spending the majority of our time being teachers and the ability to wear so many hats makes for better listening. We never feel like there is one way of doing things, there's not one correct answer when making work. We just want to impart a way of asking questions, of interrogating the world.

DB: You operate like hackers who break through a system and disintegrate institutions from the inside. For example, in 2008, you acted as press reporters to get permission to photograph the British military base in Afghanistan. You acted under a guise, provided false information about who you are and what you do to uncover deeply hidden facts. Is your aim to shed light and let others make up their minds? Or do you take it further, by actively trying to harm institutions you find inherently bad?

AB & OC: We wish we were that effective! We wouldn't be so arrogant to think we can have any impact on the powerful institutions we have infiltrated or worked with but perhaps we have managed to occasionally pry open the door just an inch or two to let people see the machine at work.







DB: Your projects discuss social and political issues. Yet, they also require you to enter into this strange relationship with powerful actors, who may try to use you for their aims, even if they expose themselves to some extent. How do you manage this risk?

AB & OC: That's a good question. I am not sure we have managed the risk well. Although we intend our work to be progressive it can easily be co-opted. Images and their collective noun, archives, are dangerous things, open to interpretation and beholden to no one. Our work can be seen as the creation of many new archives, each one as a potential argument against everything we hold dear if it lands in the wrong hands.

DB: Do you think that every work of art and every action that we take as members of society is political, every attitude is a statement?

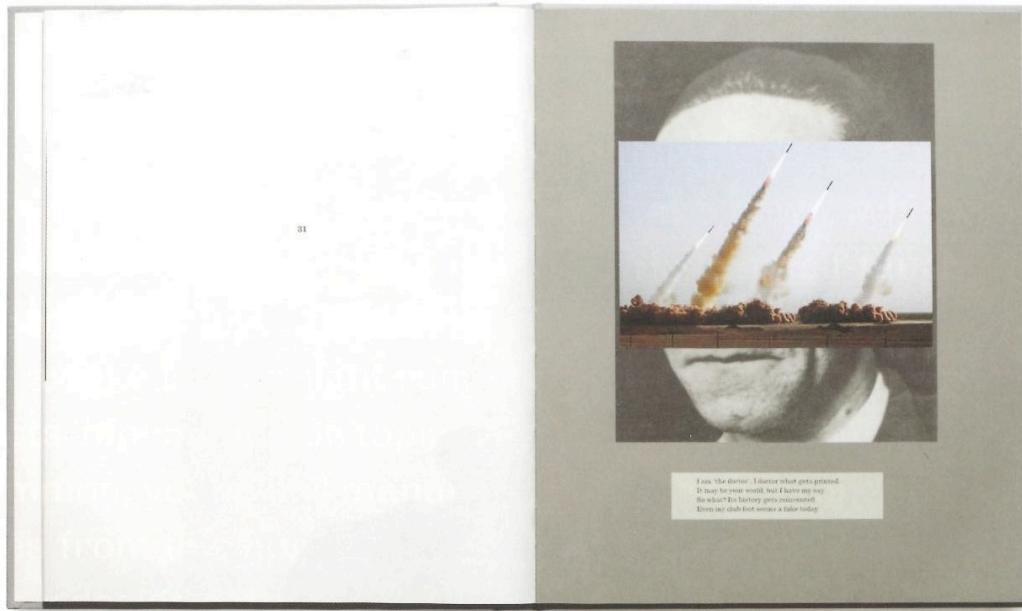
AB & OC: Yes but that doesn't mean ours are right.

DB: You also use the concept of the *politics of the material*. What does it mean?

AB & OC: The relationship between the machinery of war and that of photography and cinema is well documented. The mechanics of the machine gun allowed for the development of the film camera. The history of photography is the history of policing, of categorisation of control. Less well-known is the relationship between race and photographic technology. In our stories on Kodak and Polaroid, we explore the links between race and colour Kodak film. It's clear that early film was predicated to white skin and was what Jean Luc Godard called 'racist.' Polaroid earned 10 percent of their profits from South Africa's apartheid government by developing a camera capable of taking an efficient mugshot for the apartheid regime's pass books. It emitted 80 percent more light from its inbuilt flash to allow for the effective documentation of dark skin. These stories are not something of the past either. More and more details are emerging from the artificial intelligence community about how machine viewing is somehow gender and racially biased. This is not something that can be fixed



Broomberg & Chanarin, Kodak Ektachrome 34 1978 frame 4, To Photograph the Details of a Dark



overnight with a short line of coding, the fact is that the people who have been programming AI machines for over half a century now are short white men. Of course the deep learning that machines are doing is going to be racist and sexist. So it's clear from the past, and we fear for the future that there is a political bias built into the very material that is the basis of photographic looking and documenting.

DB: The game of deception is also one you play with a viewer at a gallery. Your projects create and present fictitious stories, fake characters, and authors (like in your 'The Alias' project from 2011). It strikes me that you emphasise at every step that there is not one story, one truth and one portrait of humanity. Or do I misread the purpose of the smoke and mirrors? Maybe in art we don't need the truth, only stories (no matter if it's true or not)?

AB & OC: We couldn't agree more. There is no one truth, contrary to what documentary photographic defenders would have us believe. At the same time we are not willing to give into some horrible post-modern idea that everything is *fake news*. We believe there is right and wrong.

DB: Your work relies on composing seemingly contrasting situations and concepts, such as trust and betrayal, truth and falsehood. Is the purpose to blur the lines between them, or maybe the opposite — to expose how they are radically different?

AB & OC: Hopefully to prove the latter by using the former.

DB: Is this constant questioning part of an artist's duty?

AB & OC: No. It's unfortunately our cross to bear. Although we are trying to reconnect with our sense of humour, which we often lose touch with.

DB: Your artistic strategies based on fiction also blur the notion of authorship. Who is an author and what is his or her role? Is it still possible to clearly assign authorship (associated with an individual, unique and creative genius) in present times?

AB & OC: Authorship is an interesting and troubling idea for us. As a duo we never really own any one idea or any marks we make, we have to share the authorship and in a sense there is a kind of anonymity to the work.

DB: In your work you often refer to your Jewish Eastern European and South African roots. I wonder if your art is a (subconscious) search for roots, where, like at an archaeological site, every new layer provides clues to the fundamental questions: where do we come from, why are we here, and for what purpose? Does each new context (private, social, political — true or false) give you the opportunity to provide new insights?

AB & OC: The more we mature, the more we can see how important our inherited trauma is for our practice. It's no coincidence that we both come from first generation Holocaust-surviving families that had to engage with apartheid South Africa. That kind of past can't be ignored and we have somehow harnessed the trauma to work for us, to help us pry open the closed doors of power.

DB: What are the projects you are working on now?

AB & OC: That is top secret. ●

LISSON GALLERY

Sunday Times
13 May 2018

Sunday Times

THE PAPER FOR THE PEOPLE

1+1=3

Sunday Times 13 May 2018 TYMON SMITH

For almost 20 years, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's work as photographers and artists — while it demonstrates a collection of concerns around the role of photography

in the digital age, the responsibilities of photographers and the role of archives in shaping our ideas about history — has also been notable for the variety of ways in which they have presented their investigations.

As Broomberg observes in his still recognisably Johannesburg Jewish manner: "We're restless

in that way, we don't have a shtick."

Broomberg was born in South Africa. Chanarin was born in London but lived part of his childhood in South Africa before returning to England. The two met in their early 20s in the Western Cape town of Wupperthal. After a call from Broomberg to Chanarin to help assemble a piece of Ikea furniture, the rest has been art history.

Over the past two decades they've developed a working relationship that Chanarin describes as being guided by "a sense that we don't really know who makes our work — it's not Adam and it's not me — it's some sort of third personality and so the authorship is divested into this collaborative space".



PLAYFULNESS Adam Broomberg, left, and Oliver Chanarin at their exhibition 'Bandage the knife not the wound' at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg.

Trinity of two

The trinity that is Broomberg and Chanarin was in Johannesburg last month to open their new show, Bandage the knife not the wound, which takes its title from a work by conceptual artist Joseph Beuys.

For a long time the artists have been thinking of what to do with their personal archives of images collected over the course of their careers — first as more traditional documentary photographers working extensively for the now-defunct Benetton Colors Magazine, and later as exhibiting artists showing work across the globe.

For years the pair lived in London, working out of a studio in the city's East End. Broomberg has since moved to Berlin and they both work as professors of photography at the University

of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

It was there, in the school's analogue lab, where the delivery of chemicals and paper has resulted in cardboard boxes lying everywhere, that Chanarin experimented with the idea of printing an image on a folded-out box using a UV printer.

Although the two teach at the same place, they're not often there at the same time, but Broomberg saw Chanarin's image and responded with his own, and so a game of ping-pong between the two began, each using images from years of shared and stored digital images on their hard drives.

For Chanarin, "it was quite accidental the way they intersected and we really just fell in love with the way the cardboard resonated through the image so that you have this sepia coming

through. It kind of brought the collage together as one image."

Through their teaching, Broomberg and Chanarin have become fascinated with the disposability of images in the digital age of Instagram where "likes" trounce the actual experience of standing in front of a piece of work.

As Broomberg sees it, "in a funny way there's been a kind of reverse in art history from the time when an art object was normally this kind of very precious, authentic piece of material that had the aura of the artist and the handprint of the artist. Now it's kind of the inverse, where the value of this object comes through how many times it is liked or repeated on the internet."

It is estimated that more than a trillion photographs were taken

in the world last year, so the artists' choice of a suitably disposable material that Chanarin describes as "essentially detritus" seems perfect for a show that seeks to raise questions about the photograph in the digital age.

Because the images were selected from their personal archives, stored over years of working together on various projects, the resulting work displays some familiar tropes. As Chanarin points out: "You can see as you walk through that there are images that repeat themselves — masks, contrasts, hand gestures, people falling over. It was quite enjoyable for us that these themes came out of the process rather than us beginning with them."

The works are not titled and have been displayed unframed with the folds of the cardboard

providing a sculptural element. This, while it may leave collectors puzzled as to how to display the images in their homes, makes for a satisfyingly three-dimensional viewing experience in the gallery.

The cardboard artworks make up the bulk of the exhibition, but they are not the centre of the show. That place belongs to a series of abstract canvases in which the white spaces created by the removal of the boxes after printing are the focus of the frame.

These works, Broomeberg notes, "are not only about whatever is outside the frame, which is something we've spoken about quite consistently for 20 years... they also highlight the idea that all photographs are abstract in their nature — there's no such thing as a non-abstract picture — but suddenly we were

able to make a very clear reference to everything except what information is contained in the frame, and that's of value in itself."

They may have revelled in the freedom to create images offered by the disposability of their chosen material, but the show is now up and so the works have entered a new phase of life, one in which the pieces of cardboard, as Chanarin observes, "become pieces of art and go from being these things that you chuck around to suddenly being these things that are handled with white gloves".

Their previous collection, *Divine Violence* — in which the artists made visual interventions in the Old Testament of a copy of the King James Bible — is currently at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.



The new work has debuted at Johannesburg's Goodman Gallery. For Broomberg in particular, "it's quite important

that this show is happening here. I've spent many a sleepless night wondering whether two middle-aged white men

who left the country at varying degrees of their adolescence have any entitlement to show their work here.

"For me it's really important to come here and stand in this room and talk about it and face the music in a way — to understand how I feel about it in my homeland, because this is still home. I think it's not accidental that we happen to have a show here and it's so personal for me."

Back to making images

Although they often finish each other's sentences, the pair don't always agree. For Chanarin, the personal elements of the show are less important but, as he points out, "this is the first conversation that we've ever had about this work. As you talk it over and over again you kind of develop a spiel and at the moment we don't have a spiel. The weird thing is: can we avoid the spiel? Do we need to talk about it? Essentially it's a digital dig of an archive ... it's

— what does it mean to be a photographer, especially in an age where everybody's taking photographs?

"Here I think we find ourselves coming back to making images."

Broomberg & Chanarin's exhibition, *Bandage the knife not the wound*, is at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg until May 26

not bound by some kind of conceptual framework and I don't really know how to talk about it."

The inscrutability of the work also appeals to Broomberg, who says if you're the kind of viewer who "might demand absolute conceptual rigour and political awareness, there's something else here that we can't actually explain and that's interesting".

Compared with their earlier work, there is a visibly looser presentation. Chanarin sees that as a reflection of the fact that they "both felt very vulnerable in producing this work and actually that feeling of vulnerability is essential".

It's a vulnerability that comes through in many of the images, but there is also a typical Broomberg and Chanarin sense of play and impishness in evi-

dence. Both the vulnerability and the playfulness are perhaps the result of the process, in which, Broomberg says, "there was no judgment and we actually let each other do what we wanted. In a way we've spent 20 years reducing our work down to what passes the Adam-and-Ollie censorship board and this is a time when we've had to let go of that."

Finally, there's another ironic way in which this collection of images reflecting on the ethereal self-flagellations of social media photography signals a departure for "Adam and Ollie". That is, in Chanarin's words, "a return to photography, because although these 'canvases' are very abstract, if you walk around the show there's a real joy in the images and an embracing of image-making, and that's something we've been agonising over for many years

LISSON GALLERY

Telegraph Luxury
15 October 2017

LUXURY

Adam Broomberg (left) wears: all his own clothes. Oliver Chanarin wears: trousers, £440, Comme des Garçons Homme Plus (farfetch.com). All other clothes, his own



The Disruptors

Broomberg & Chanarin

'I wouldn't describe us as war photographers,' says Oliver Chanarin, explaining his 19-year creative partnership with Adam Broomberg. 'Our work has always been about the role of photography in conflict zones, rather than the conflict itself. We're interested in photography as a currency in our lives.' Their practice has evolved considerably: artistic endeavours running alongside commercial work for Benetton's *Colors* magazine among others, until 10 years ago when art took over. Today, the pair are professors of photography at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

Passengers at King's Cross St Pancras station can view their latest piece, a powerful 12-minute film *The Bureaucracy of Angels*,

which explores the immigration crisis. 'We're expressing something about the Mediterranean Sea, which is a playground for us but also where people disappear – it's a war zone,' says Chanarin. Such preoccupations continue in their forthcoming show *Divine Violence* at the Pompidou Centre next February, exploring the history of conflict. Clothing is normally not so high on the agenda, though they appreciate Comme des Garçons and Martin Margiela. Chanarin says, 'We wear the same thing everyday until it breaks. We look like waiters at St John restaurant.' *The Bureaucracy of Angels*, commissioned by Art on the Underground, at King's Cross St Pancras Station, London, till 25 November; art.tfl.gov.uk

LISSON GALLERY

The Art Newspaper

26 July 2017

THE ART NEWSPAPER

IN THE FRAME

Refugee film for King's Cross commuters

by THE ART NEWSPAPER | 26 July 2017



The Bureaucracy of Angels. (Courtesy of Broomberg & Chanarin, Art on the Underground & Lisson Gallery)

Visitors passing through King's Cross Station this autumn will see a new, 12-minute film by the artist duo Broomberg & Chanarin. The piece, entitled *The Bureaucracy of Angels*, focuses on the demolition of 100 boats in Sicily used to transport thousands of refugees fleeing from North Africa. "The artists visited Sicily a number of times where they were able to explore the area where migrants arrive from perilous journeys across the Mediterranean," a press statement says. The duo filmed the rescue missions organised by the Migrant Offshore Aid Station foundation off the coast of Libya, as well as the destruction of the dilapidated boats left in a shipping grave yard in Porto Pozallo in Sicily. The Art on the Underground film commission, unveiled in September, will be shown in a space near to the Eurostar exit.

LISSON GALLERY

Wall Street International

6 March 2017

Wall Street International ART

Broomberg & Chanarin. Trace Evidence

20 Jan – 17 Mar 2017 at Lisson in Milan, Italy



Broomberg & Chanarin. *Trace Evidence*, Exhibition view. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

6 MAR 2017

Broomberg & Chanarin's first solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery Milan provides a broad overview of the artists' work through eight different photographic series from 2006 to 2016, presented alongside a new work created especially for the show.

Trace evidence is created when objects collide or connect and some material is transferred by friction between them. The term is associated with forensic science and the reconstruction of crimes, often describing how people, places and inanimate things interact with each other. An examination of Broomberg & Chanarin's work over the past decade uncovers an approach to photography that is both anthropological and political in nature, characterised by an inherently investigative quality. The artists use photography as a form of conceptual ethnography, immersing themselves into spaces and situations that reveal evidence, residue or traces of past human presence. With abstracted imagery deliberately lacking a central subject or focal point, their refusal to depict or narrativise has become one of their primary tools for communicating the ineffable in war and conflict.

Works on display bring to the fore the duo's constructions of identity and human behaviour and can be understood as surrogates for missing objects or persons. The exhibition title draws directly from a recent work by Broomeberg & Chanarin, created in 2015 for the Freud Museum in London, in which they commissioned a police forensics team to gather DNA samples of hairs and other fibres from the rug covering Freud's couch. These findings were transformed into a large woven tapestry, mirroring the scale and texture of the original, as well as a number of high-resolution radiographic quartz images, all collated under the rubric of Trace Evidence. When the artists were embedded with the British Army in Afghanistan, rather than photographing the landscape or soldiers in combat, they unrolled lengths of photographic paper to 'record' abstract moments. Only the titles the artists later assigned to these compositions – The Day Nobody Died or Repatriation (all 2008) – allude to a time, place or death, combining to create an alternative war diary.

The idea of staging, rehearsal and artifice relates to the artists' on-going interest in German poet Bertold Brecht and his experiments in poetry and theatre, an influence that is also evident in Portable Monuments (2012). Here the artists use coloured blocks as stand-ins for significant events or characters from newspaper photographs, the resulting fictions are vehicles to explore the documentation, dissemination and currency of media imagery.

Subversive investigations into the mainstream continue in American Landscapes (2009), which spotlight the interiors of commercial photography studios across the USA where images are manufactured, again in opposition to the rules of representation. Physical restriction and personal expression are more closely observed in Red House (2006) – photos of marks and drawings made on the walls of a building in Iraq by Kurdish prisoners – the recorded traces of oppression.

Lisson

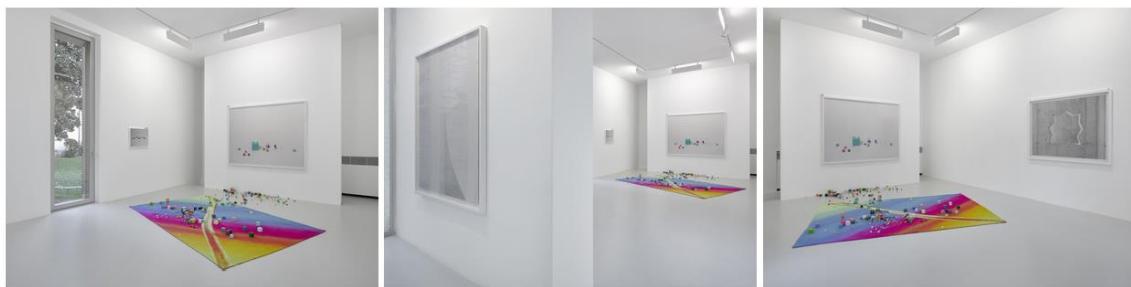
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Opening hours

Monday to Friday
From 10am to 1pm
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Captions

1. Broomeberg & Chanarin. Trace Evidence, Exhibition view. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery
2. Broomeberg & Chanarin. Trace Evidence, Exhibition view. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery
3. Broomeberg & Chanarin. Trace Evidence, Exhibition view. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

LISSON GALLERY

The Art Newspaper
23 January 2017

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
THE ART NEWSPAPER

NEWS

Broomberg & Chanarin to bring their politically-engaged art to the London Underground

New film at Canary Wharf will focus on refugee crisis in Europe, while current show in Milan includes topical works from past ten years

by GARETH HARRIS | 23 January 2017



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (Photo: Thierry Bal, © Broomberg & Chanarin. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery)

The artist duo Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who have tackled subjects such as the war in Afghanistan and the terrorist attacks in London, are making their presence felt with a new exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in Milan and a commission for Art on the Underground in London, which will be unveiled in September.

Commuters passing through Canary Wharf tube station in the city's financial district will see a film showing the destruction of boats used to transport refugees fleeing from Libya and Syria to Italy. The pair spent a year gaining access to the port in Sicily where more than 100 migrant boats were stored.

"The week before Christmas, the Italian government began to demolish the boats [and] we were there to document the destruction with forensic detail. The demolition of the hundred boats felt like such a melancholic act of violence, undertaken by the state against objects that speak of culture and loss," Chanarin says.

Meanwhile, an exhibition of the duo's works at Lisson Gallery in Milan, which opened last week (*Trace Evidence*; until 17 March), is described by the gallery as a broad overview of the artists' canon, featuring works drawn from eight photographic series spanning a decade from 2006-16. Andreas Leventis, the associate director at Lisson Gallery who organised the show, says: "Their work resists representation; in every image, something or someone is missing."



Installation view of Broomberg & Chanarin: Trace Evidence at the Lisson Gallery, Milan. (Photo: Jack Hems. © Broomberg & Chanarin. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery)

Among the works is a woven tapestry with a blown-up image of the scientific samples of the debris, left by Sigmund Freud's patients and family members among others, on the Persian rug covering his famous couch in his north London home (now the Freud Museum). The piece—titled *Trace Fiber from Freud's Couch under crossed polars with Quartz wedge compensator (#3) (2015)*—is based on DNA and other particles collected by a police forensic team.

Artforum
14 June 2016
<http://artforum.com/words/id=60581>

ARTFORUM

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

06.14.16



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Rudiments*, 2015, HD, color, sound, 12 minutes.

*Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin are a collaborative duo whose photography-based practice explores themes of institutional authority, surveillance, and consent in an era of rapid technological advances. Here they discuss their recent book, *Spirit Is a Bone* (Mack, 2015), as well as their first US solo exhibition, which is on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art through September 11, 2016.*

IN MARK TWAIN'S 1905 pamphlet *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, he assumes the persona of King Leopold bemoaning the arrival of the camera, the "incorruptible Kodak." This new technology is able to bear witness to the atrocities the king was committing in the Congo, and undermining the lies that he could previously manage in the press. Surveillance, of course, has since reached new levels of horror. Our book *Spirit Is a Bone* uses technology developed in Moscow, just now being rolled out worldwide, which allows the state to create a three-dimensional photograph, a digital life mask, of citizens in crowded public places—made without any consent or knowledge. They call these "non-collaborative portraits," and the phenomenon marks a fundamental shift in portraiture, where for the first time there is no relation between the imagemakers and the subject—the citizens. Using this same technology, we re-created August Sander's entire life's work in four days by casting all of his "categories" of people on the streets of Russia. Our poet is the wonderful Lev Rubinstein and the revolutionary is Yekaterina Samutsevich, from Pussy Riot.

We've spent some time in war zones, so when approaching new work, we decide to take some steps back and examine the beginnings of when young people give over to hierarchy, authority, and power. Virginia Woolf nailed it in *Three Guineas*, when she said that if men were not in control of education, business, and government, then perhaps there'd be a chance for peace. We gained access to a cadet camp in Liverpool—it's a grim military base where schoolkids between the ages of seven and seventeen get sent to learn how to march, drum, drill, and obey orders. What we didn't tell the military was that we were coming with a *bouffon*—a dark clown whose performance teeters on vulgarity. Each evening our bouffon held workshops with the kids, effectively getting them to unlearn the day's discipline. This power play is the basis of our film *Rudiments*, which is currently showing at the Baltimore Museum of Art.



Trailer for Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Rudiments*, 2015.

We typically work in spaces populated by journalists, not in an artist's studio or on a film set. But we treat these settings as backdrops to a performance, a dance with authority that inevitably ends in us being booted out. We are curious about how these institutions of power function, from the military to psychiatric hospitals. The state's increasingly insidious command of our lives is acutely troubling. As photographers we always try to remember that the technology of imagemaking is never morally neutral, that it always embodies the ideology of whoever uses it. So much of our work is about seduction—getting permission to enter these spaces to gain an understanding of the workings and then find some way of fucking them over, of exposing the machinery.

— As told to Gabriel H. Sanchez

LISSON GALLERY

Another
11 March 2016

AnOther

Art & Photography / Culture Talks

Photographic Portraits Made by Russian Surveillance Cameras

— March 11, 2016 —

Broomberg and Chanarin's latest series repurposes equipment used to document citizens in modern-day Moscow, resulting in every images the artists deem "the digital equivalent of a death mask"



Detail © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin 2015 courtesy MACK © Jungjin Lee 2014 courtesy MACK

Text [Maisie Skidmore](#)

A strangely hollow greyscale face gazes out eerily from the cover of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's most recent book, *Spirit Is a Bone*, occupying the liminal space somewhere between an X-ray and a photograph. Its anonymity is very deliberate – the image was created not with a normal camera, but with repurposed surveillance technology usually employed by the Russian government, where it compiles images from thousands of snapshots taken on street corners and in train stations 24/7 – a concept that the artists are very much ill-at-ease with. "This technology is accumulating hundreds of thousands of archival images every day," Chanarin tells me over the phone. "There is an overwhelming flood of archival and historical information being recorded by the state. That's a very frightening thought."



Structurally, *Spirit is a Bone* is based on German photographer August Sander's 1926 taxonomy of German society, *People of the 20th Century*, in which he attempted to create an exhaustive cross-section of what people in 1920s Germany were like by dividing them up into sections – 'The Farmer', 'The Artists', 'The City', etc. Likewise, Broomberg and Chanarin street-cast a selection of people on the streets of Moscow to fill the same categories, but with intriguing new subjects. "For example, we photographed Yekaterina Samutsevich, one of the imprisoned members of Pussy Riot, to replace Sanders' 'Revolutionary,'" Chanarin says. "Our 'Poet' was the conceptual writer Lev Rubinstein, who composed many of his famous 'note card poems' whilst working in the Lenin Library in Moscow."

The shooting process was an uncomfortable one for Chanarin, largely due to the intensely impersonal way in which the photographs were made: the equipment was set up in a Moscow studio and subjects invited to walk through it while the cameras recorded their image, to create the ghostly, death-mask-like imprint. Partly as a result of the impersonality of this process, the overall impact of the book is unnerving above all else. Still, it is effective in its aim. "We're living in an age when the notion of privacy is being redefined in favour of power," Chanarin says. "What we want to do with this book is to invite people to think about what it feels like to be watched." In the below quotations from their conversation with architect Eyal Weizman, Broomberg and Chanarin discuss the historical and cultural implications of the work, and question the resonance of the photographic portrait in contemporary society.



The Society Lady © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin 2015 courtesy MACK ©
Jungjin Lee 2014 courtesy MACK

On the technology they used to create the portraits...

"The portraits in this book were produced by advanced facial recognition technology that is being brought into use, as we speak, in cities around the world. Software engineers in Moscow developed the technology from an existing system built to recognise car number plates. What first sparked our interest when speaking with these engineers was the technical challenge they faced in producing what they call 'non-collaborative portraits' – where the subject is neither consensual nor necessarily aware of the camera. These portraits, essentially three-dimensional data maps rather than photographs per se, form a digital archive that can be rotated in space on a computer screen. There is never a moment in the capturing of the 'image' when human contact is registered; the subject's gaze, or any connection between photographer and sitter that we would ordinarily rely on in looking at a portrait, is a complete fiction in this space. What we're seeing is the negation of that humanity: the digital equivalent of a death mask."



On the influence of August Sander on the project...

"Thinking about the human face, of portraiture and the defunct histories of physiognomy and phrenology, it's impossible not to also think about August Sander, who set out to document the society around him during Weimar Germany, after the end of the First World War. He starts with the wholesome person who works on the land, he then moves on to employed people – the Banker, the Baker – and then he progressively moves on to the Poet, the Artist, the Artist's Wife, and then to more marginalised people: the Unemployed, the Vagrant, the Revolutionary, and ends with 'The Last People', comprised of a single portfolio documenting 'Idiots, the Sick, the Insane and Matter.'

The last of these categories, 'Matter', is possibly the most illuminating for our purposes – these were photographs of the dead, one male, one female, followed by a single final photograph, 'Death Mask of Erich Sander, 1944', Sander's son. This image is stripped of any background context, the mask floats in empty space, eerily reminiscent of the portraits in this book."

On the relevance of creating a series about surveillance in present-day Russia...

"Sander was determined to show a full and complete record of Weimar society but unfortunately his project was interrupted by the Second World War and the rise of Nazism. There's a moral tale embedded in his project that even Sander could not have foreseen. Incomplete at the time of his death, his archive has been subjected to a constant re-reading and re-presenting. On the one hand it's a heroic attempt to capture and preserve an image of a society reeling from one destruction and on the brink of another; on the other hand his portraits take on a new and sinister meaning when seen through the prism of Aryan supremacy, itself built on the foundations of colonial rhetoric of superior and sub-human hierarchies.

We see disturbing parallels of this totalitarian regime in present-day Russia: from the threat of imprisonment where individuals to all intents and purposes disappear from society to the illegal annexation of whole countries, and the kind of assassination plots so brazen and sensational that you would think they could only exist on a film screen. And all with relative impunity."

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's Spirit is a Bone is out now, published by MACK.

BE FURIOUS YOU'RE GOING TO DIE

BY ADAM CARR



Shirley #1 from the series "The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement" 2013. Courtesy: the artists

The works of the art duo Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin are based on the assumption and questioning of different professional roles and practices, from photojournalism—which they undertake as a necessarily risky activity in Afghanistan—to a type of archaeology of modernity and “humor” that traces back through the strata of events in a given place. Adam Carr met the artists to talk over the opportunities that have led to many of their works, which often involve aspects of exhibition and publishing at the same time.

Adam Carr: Let's start where you started. How did you become interested with the visual arts? When did you first meet? I remember I asked this question when we first met a few months ago, and I was surprised to hear that though you are both from South Africa, you didn't really meet there properly.

Oliver Chanarin: We met in Wuppertal, South Africa on a camping trip. I don't think Adam and I said two words to each other, but several years later I was living in London and Adam came to study at Saint Martins, mostly to avoid military conscription. He called me because he needed help constructing a flat pack Ikea bed his brother had given him. That's how it started. Neither of us had studied art or art theory and our practice came out of philosophy, politics and a sort of idiotic curiosity. About 10 years after that, we discovered we were cousins, distantly related, which is not so odd actually since our grandparents all came to South Africa via the same Lithuanian shtetl.

Adam Broomberg: It's a puddle of a gene pool. My mother taught at a kindergarten run by Olly's late grandmother, a formidable character who was infamously the first woman to trade on the South African stock exchange. The last time we saw her she was well past 100 years old, sitting in a Jewish old-age home in Johannesburg, staring blankly into space. When we got up to leave, I stroked her hand and walked off... after about a hundred paces I heard a booming voice yell "Cheerio Broomberg!" I want that carved on my tombstone.

ac: What was the first project that you worked on together?

ab: It was a book and show called "Trust". It was shown at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg and published as a book: a clumsy meditation on the absolute authority of the camera. Its various chapters charted the subjects' inability to compose themselves, beginning with people absolutely absorbed in video games and ending with people under general anaesthesia. As a body of work, it testifies to how the camera has always been so tied up with power and is in fact a part of its arsenal. Somehow people unfailingly agreed to be photographed, no matter how vulnerable they were. I'm sure it would be impossible now to repeat that project, which was made almost twenty years ago.

oc: It wasn't a great book but I most clearly remember the last chapter... those portraits of men and women going under general anaesthesia. We managed to obtain access to the operating theatre at Guy's Hospital thanks to a close friend who was an anaesthetist there. Later he gave it up to become a performance artist, so he understood where we were coming from. We spent two months going to Guy's, interviewing patients during the pre-op and asking them to sign a consent form to have their portrait taken while they were asleep during their operation. What really shocked us was that not a single patient declined to be photographed. They were all so vulnerable and scared. When you are in any institution you give over so much authority to it. It dawned on us that we were aligned with the institution. Over the years we've found ourselves in lots of comparable situations—embedded with the Ministry of Defence in Afghanistan, or giving a photography workshop to Israeli Defence Force soldiers, or gangs in the Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison—where our role is repeatedly somehow unclear to both those in power and to the subjects, for whom the camera seems to offer some kind of salvation, a false promise. We've somehow managed to harness that ambiguity, that duplicity, and it's become a central theme of our work.

ac: Something you said before, Adam, about your early way of working—which you described as a classic documentary mode of photography—is connected with an interest I have had regarding your work, which I have not had the opportunity to ask you about before. Your work seems to have shifted from the "photographic world" to the visual art world, if there is ever a separation between the two. A related question is about your books. When does a work settle as a book and when does it become something for an exhibition? I mean in the traditional sense of a presentation of objects in a gallery space. Though of course there is a whole history of artists who have treated the book as an exhibition space, or the exhibition space as a book...

ab: There was certainly a definite shift at one point. Our doubts and uncomfortable shuffles have always been motivated by well-timed texts that somehow find their way onto our paths. One memorable text during this particular shift

was *The Journalist and the Murderer* by Janet Malcolm, in which she repeatedly expresses how baffled she is that people continue to confess to her as if she were a psychoanalyst, knowing all too well that she is a journalist—she is confused by their willingness to lay bare all of their dirt. Even though she's now notorious, people still can't help themselves. We share her scepticism with the medium and the one-way flow of power. Unlike her, though, we are not out to exploit that flow.



The Day Nobody Died (still), 2008. Courtesy: the artists

oc: Books are more democratic objects. They are affordable, which makes them very different from art-world objects. And more intimate too. We always advise people who buy our Holy Bible to leave it in the toilet. That's the best place to really engage with it.

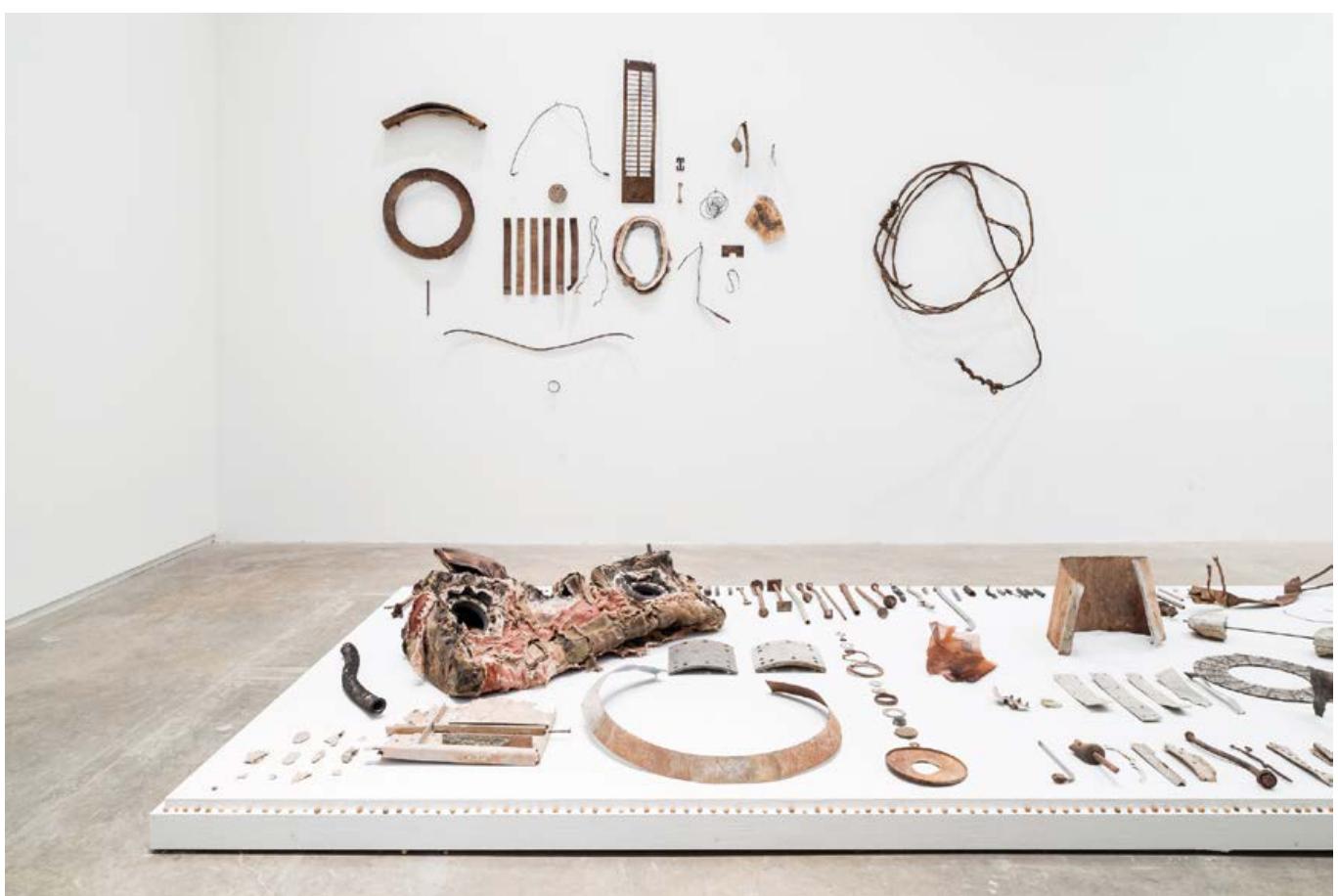
ac: It was interesting to me, during one of our previous conversations, to hear that you first made the book of Holy Bible on the wall in your studio, so to have it framed, isolated and presented within the context of an exhibition space comes back, in part, to how you envisaged it initially. I wanted to ask you to expand on something you mentioned before about the different guises you sometimes have to assume to achieve your works, which meddle with different modes of representation, and in fact, different genres... I am thinking here about the project you did in Afghanistan, which was less about documenting the war but more about exposing time spent there, in both a political and economic sense, and perhaps questioning the genre of war reportage. The project was as much a conceptual exercise as it was a political one (though of course the two can and do overlap). The project certainly speaks a conceptual language in its underpinning of process, performance and presentation, that could be seen to link back to artists synonymous with the birth of Conceptual Art...

oc: You wouldn't think of Robert Capa's image of a Republican soldier dying as conceptual, but recently unearthed interviews with Capa reveal that he was too scared to put his head above the trench wall, and made the photograph blind, holding the camera above his head and snapping randomly. Who would have thought that the quintessential photojournalistic image, made by our "brave" (male) proxy with a perfect sense of timing, was actually a forerunner of techniques like chance or accident applied by conceptual artists using photography? Our work in Afghanistan is conceptual, in that it could be distilled into a set of instructions and executed by anybody. But it was also an extremely dangerous undertaking, driving around Helmand Province in a "Snatch" vehicle we had turned into a darkroom, risking being blown up by an IED (improvised explosive device). That element of risk was part of it too... we had to be present, to be in danger, for the performance and the outcome to have any value. And there was nothing conceptual about the danger. It was very real.

ab: It's the documentation, the film that follows the McGuffin, the box of photographic paper, from our studio in London to the front line and back, which is more important than the works themselves. The film functions to analyse the logistics and the banal ecosystem of a conflict zone. It also demonstrates the most infuriating element of the project: how art can lie to and expose power.



Set of Catch 22, Guaymas, Mexico, 1969. Courtesy: the artists and Uribe Collection



"Dodo" installation view at Fundación JUMEX, Mexico City, 2014. Courtesy: the artists and Fundación JUMEX, Mexico City



"Dodo" installation view at Fundación JUMEX, Mexico City, 2014.
Courtesy: the artists and Fundación JUMEX, Mexico City



"The earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up together"
- Numbers 26:10, from Holy Bible; "Life for life, {21:24} Eye
for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, {21:25}
Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe - Exodus
21:23 from Holy Bible, MACK/AMC, 2013. Courtesy: the artists



"Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt" installation view at
FotoMuseum, Antwerp, 2014. Courtesy: the artists.
Photo: Lukas Verdiijk & Vesna Faassen

oc: Our recent show "Divine Violence", where each chapter of the Holy Bible is framed individually, reflects the process of its construction more honestly than the bound book does. We poured through over 10,000 images to make the 720 individual works. We didn't do it in a linear fashion, as the book suggests. It was much more chaotic and accidental. The exhibition, which looks much more like a massive collage, is a more honest rendition. It was overwhelming walking in there, whereas the book tends to tame the work. You can close a book, put it away. But you can't escape the claustrophobia and confrontation of an exhibition of that work.

ac: Your recent exhibition at Jumex in Mexico revolved around the set of the Hollywood adaptation of the novel *Catch-22*, which again was much about assuming other roles—archaeologists, in this case—together with a team of professionals. Could you explain the project and some of its starting points?

oc: There's a phrase in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, "Be furious you're going to die", which became our motto, because the project traces a series of extinctions. Hence the title "Dodo", which was the first species to be made extinct by human activity. With the help of the Jumex Foundation, we got permission to return to the location where the film version of *Catch-22* was shot, in northwest Mexico. Almost nothing in recorded history happened in this desolate place until May 22, 1969. The peak of the Tetakawi (Goat's Breasts) Mountain was the only landmark along a deserted stretch of coastline. Now there is a highway along the narrow space between the desert and the Sea of Cortez, a favourite feeding spot for a variety of whales. A sequence of discordant buildings lines this path: hotels, holiday bungalows and weekend houses for families from nearby Hermosillo or retirees from Canada and the United States. A weak, corrupt or perhaps just indifferent local planning department has left this stretch of real estate looking ill considered and haphazard. However, in 1969, before all this, San Carlos resembled Pianosa, the diminutive island off the coast of Sicily where Joseph Heller set his satirical Second World War novel.

ab: This single event came to define the town of San Carlos and its surrounding landscape forever. The transformation began with the construction of an enormous runway, 6,000 feet long and 40 feet wide, large enough to accommodate eighteen B-25 bombers. Years later, the runway was commandeered by drug cartels and then destroyed by the Mexican military. In 1969, the smooth black tarmac ran perpendicular to the ocean, cutting cleanly through the scrub like a prehistoric message. Stunt pilot Frank Tallman had been responsible for assembling the fleet and reported that each plane was purchased, repaired and made sky-worthy at an average cost of \$10,000. There were so many planes on the set—some of them whole, others in pieces—that it was considered the sixth biggest air force in the world at the time. The director of photography David Watkins insisted on shooting in the middle of the day, when the sun was at its apex. Thus actors are silhouetted and the background is burned out, giving an effect of perpetual limbo that echoes the strange dislocated mood of Heller's narrative. With just two hours of shooting per day, the production quickly went over budget and off schedule. Yet little of this abundant material made it into the final cut. Most of it has instead languished in a sealed box in the Paramount Studio archives ever since. The box contains 4,891 strips of film, some as short as several frames. Time has done its work, and these fragments have inadvertently become the record of a landscape that has changed beyond recognition. Thus material from a fictional film set in 1944 in Italy is transformed into a nature documentary set in 1968.

ac: The show was set into different environments. The parts of the plane were displayed in such a way that they seemed to mimic a display akin to a natural history museum, and the larger space was taken up by an operating plane propeller, which seemed right at home, since the exhibition space is a former factory. Also, something you said earlier made me think about your work as a comment about the politicization of technology... This is perhaps most apparent in your piece *The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers...*

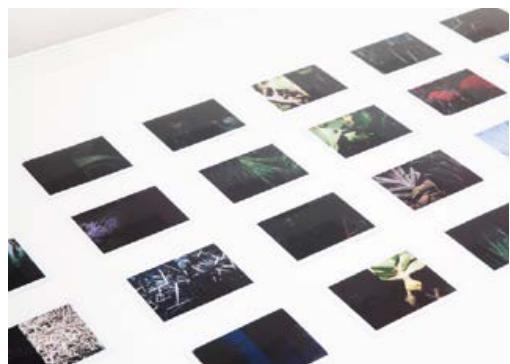
oc: Like the Dodo, of which there is no single whole skeleton in the world, our archaeological finds were a minestrone of various bombers. Apart from the propeller, the various other components are laid out on a small plinth and hung on the walls in a small separate space, using the nails for the set construction. Many of the objects found by our archaeological team are undoubtedly parts of the B-25 bomber. These were collected, photographed, measured, catalogued and eventually displayed at the Jumex gallery. The effect, as you say, is similar to a museum display, albeit an undisciplined and unruly one. But there was a second group of objects that may have been part of the plane, though it was hard to be sure. And the objects in the final group were definitely unrelated, such as the thousands of pellets of dried rabbit shit that we found at the location. We decided not to discriminate, so the objects are displayed without hierarchy. The curator dubbed it archaeology with a sense of humour.

ab: The gallery at Jumex is vast, and we decided to install just two other objects in this large space, a propeller from a B-25 bomber and a cinema-scale screen. There was also a double reversal of intentions here. A mechanical intention—propellers usually suck air, but we had it turning in reverse, filling the space with air and making the cinema screen bellow and drag in the breeze. And then a metaphorical intention—by turning a fictional film into a nature documentary, we upset its original function.



I.D.0008 from the series "The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement", 2012. Courtesy: the artists

oc: *The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement* is something very different, but again technology is the central protagonist. In this case a very special camera, which we used to photograph plant specimens in South Africa.



"The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement" installation view at Biel/Bienne Festival of Photography, 2013. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Prune Simon-Vermot

ab: The story goes that in 1970 Caroline Hunter, a young chemist working for the Polaroid Corporation, stumbled upon evidence that her multinational employers were indirectly supporting apartheid. With the collusion of local South African distributors Frank & Hirsch, Polaroid was able to provide the ID-2 camera system to the South African state, to efficiently produce images for the infamous passbooks.

oc: The camera included a boost button designed to increase the flash when photographing subjects with dark skin, and two lenses which allowed for the production of a frontal and profile portrait on the same sheet of film. Along with her partner Ken Williams, Hunter formed the Polaroid Workers Revolutionary Movement, and campaigned for a boycott. By 1977 Polaroid finally did withdraw from South Africa, and the international divestment movement—which contributed to put an end to apartheid—was on its way.

ac: What are you working on currently?

ab: Brecht spoke about his work as a series of attempts, the word in German is Versuche.

oc: It's a nice word because it leaves open the possibility that a work is never finished.

ab: One of the attempts we are working on is a contemporary opera. The idea of making an opera began while working on our recent project *War Primer* 2, which is a book that physically inhabits the pages of Brecht's remarkable 1955 publication, *Kriegsfibel* or *War Primer*. The original is a collection of Brecht's newspaper clippings about World War II, each accompanied by a four-line poem or "photo-epigram". It is a practical manual, demonstrating how to "read" or

"translate" press photographs, and it reflects Brecht's unease about the way such images of war were being distributed and interpreted. Later we learned that Brecht hoped to transform his book into an opera, and he invited Hans Eisler to set his photo-epigrams to music. There are 85 photo-epigrams in all, but Eisler only managed to write 15 compositions before they both returned to East Germany and abandoned the project. Brecht died in 1956 and the work was never completed.

oc: The term opera is misleading though... we envisage a large-scale installation and performance presented in a gallery space, rather than a theatre. In the spirit of Brecht, who famously collaborated with workers' musical groups in East Germany, we are keen to perform the original Eisler compositions with a military youth orchestra, and we will be interrogating these young cadets on their personal notions of war (and peace).



Chicago #, 2006. Courtesy: the artists

ab: Another project we are working on is called *Schtik Fleis Mit Tzvey Eigen* which is a Yiddish insult meaning "A Piece of Meat with Two Eyes". It's a phrase that my grandmother called my mother every morning of her life, apparently. For this we began experimenting with a technology known as non-collaborative portraiture, which reflects some startling new developments in the romance between photography and the state. The camera we are using was designed for facial recognition purposes in crowded areas such as subway stations, railroad stations, stadiums, concert halls or other public areas, but also for photographing people who would normally resist being photographed.



Chicago #, 2006. Courtesy: the artists

oc: Any subject encountering this type of camera is rendered passive, because no matter in what direction he or she looks, the face is always rendered looking forward and stripped bare of shadows, make-up, disguises or mood. So far we've produced a series of portraits in Moscow, where the camera has been developed. The success of these "portraits" is determined by how precisely the machine can identify its subject: the characteristics of the nose, the eyes, the chin, and how these three intersect. Nevertheless, the pictures cannot help being portraits of individuals, struggling and often failing to negotiate a civil contract with state power.

ab: We recently encountered a strange collection of objects housed in a provincial museum in Istanbul. They are contorted bits of metal that are the result of two bullets having accidentally collided on the battlefield and fused. We've begun a photographic catalogue of these coincidences, each one effectively having saved two lives.

oc: A bit like the two of us.



"Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt" installation view at FotoMuseum, Antwerp, 2014.
Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Lukas Verdijk & Vesna Faassen



The Day Nobody Died V, June 10, 2008.
Courtesy: the artists



The Day Nobody Died (still), 2008. Courtesy: the artists

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian, UK
6th February 2014

6/2/2014 Broomberg and Chanarin's best photograph: Pussy Riot in 3D | Art and design
| The Guardian

Broomberg and Chanarin's best photograph: Pussy Riot in 3D

'We took this with Russia's new 3D surveillance camera. Pussy Riot's Yekaterina was happy to pose'

Karin Andreasson

The Guardian, Thursday 6 February 2014



Yekaterina Samutsevich of Pussy Riot, from Two Eyes Above a Nose Above a Mouth, 2013. Photograph: Broomberg and Chanarin

Last summer, we went to Moscow to visit a company that was developing a new kind of portraiture. The aim is to take shots of people passing through places like border crossings, railway stations, sports halls, even cinemas. It is eerie and sinister: it captures the shape of a face in a split second, from multiple angles, using various lenses. It then constructs a 3D model of the head that can be closely analysed and stored for future reference. The result is more like a death mask than a photograph. The eyes have a deadened appearance because at no point does the subject look into a camera.

The image could be used as evidence in a court of law in the same way as a fingerprint. So if somebody was in a protest and a camera caught just part of their face, their identity could be traced – if one of these pictures had already been taken of them.

What scares us is that this technology operates in what its developers call the non- collaborative mode: the subject is not aware of the camera, they never look into it, or engage with it. Yet historically, photography has always been about collaboration: there has always been a relationship between subject and photographer. Sometimes it's been romantic, sometimes problematic. This undoes all of that narrative.

The big theme of the last year has been the degree to which both state and companies can access our private lives. This technology takes things a step further by colonising the human face. It might be used at a petrol station: a camera recognises the face of a 35-year- old woman and then an advert for sugarfree gum is sent to her radio.

Our work is heavily influenced by August Sander, a photographer who spent his life documenting Weimar Germany, from the butcher to the banker to the vagabond. What he ended up with were portraits of people at a time when Europe was imploding and the Nazis were using social categories for their own ends. We felt echoes of that in today's Russia, so we decided to use this new technology to re-enact his great work, People of the Twentieth Century.

We photographed 120 people using Sander's categories. One was the revolutionary, which in Russia today clearly had to be one of the Pussy Riot girls. If you spend any time there, you'll find that, in broad society, they are totally disrespected. We wanted to take this technology developed for state control and subvert it, so it made sense to involve them. Yekaterina Samutsevich was happy to pose for us.

Ironically, the only deterrent against this camera is very low-tech: the balaclava. So we are calling for people to knit them. When these shots go on show, we will have knitting circles. That way, people can make their own.

- *Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin feature in Ruin Lust at Tate Britain, London, 4 March to 18 May.*

CV: Oliver Chanarin Born: London, 1971.

Studied: Philosophy and computer science, Sussex University. Influences: "August Sanders, Walker Evans, Saul Bellow, my mother." High point: "Winning the Deutsche Börse prize." Lowpoint: "Photographing David Cameron." Top tip: "Never refuse an invitation."

CV: Adam Broomberg Born: Johannesburg, 1970. Studied: Sociology at University of

the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Influences: "The Marx brothers." High point: "Sharing an opening of our work at MoMa with work by Magritte." Low point: "Photographing cheese in Ragusa." Top tip: "Life is short."