

1 *Die Antwoord*, 2009, Roger Ballen, whose work is on show in Krakow this month at the Bunkier Sztuki.

Truth or lies?

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin are curating this year's Krakow Photomonth festival, gathering more than 100 writers, photographers and artists to take a playful look at fiction, finds **Diane Smyth**

At last year's Brighton Photo Biennial, Alec Soth presented a body of work by his seven-year-old daughter Carmen. He claimed he'd been unable to shoot a commission to photograph the city because of visa problems, so he'd had the idea of getting Carmen to do it instead. But faced with a room full of perfectly adequate pictures and this puzzling back story, I wasn't the only visitor to voice my suspicions. Could he really have got away with putting his daughter to work instead of himself, one of the world's most influential photographers? Or could he have assumed her identity for the show – just as he sometimes assumes the alter ego Lester B Morrison [2]?

Whatever the truth of the story (and Soth maintains its veracity), the uncertainty had an interesting effect on the viewers. Unsure whether the images should be judged against Soth's back catalogue or the average seven-year-olds', visitors had to look at them for themselves and make up their own minds whether they liked them. So it's not surprising to see Soth is a prominent participant in this year's Krakow Photomonth festival, which is titled *Alias* and is based on the idea of the heteronym.

"The term refers to fictitious authors with thorough biographies, which artists inhabit to create work," says Adam Broomberg, who curated the festival with long-term working partner Oliver Chanarin. "Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa came up with it and he had about 70 'nonexistent acquaintances', and would adopt very different aesthetic strategies according to each author's psychology."

Broomberg and Chanarin have used the concept two ways, by creating a large, historical survey

of photographers and artists who have used heteronyms – including Soth's Lester B Morrison, Marcel Duchamp's *Rose Sélavy* and Walid Raad's *Atlas Group* – and by commissioning 23 writers to create new fictional artists, and pairing them with 23 artists to make their artworks. Soth was one of those who was commissioned, though who he was paired with and who his new character is, are secrets.

Celebrity culture

"I think it's important that people are able to approach this work quite fresh and enjoy it or not," says Broomberg. "If I go and see an exhibition of Alec Soth's new work, I'm looking at it through the prism of all his previous projects and his reputation. In this you won't know which is his work, so you won't have the baggage of walking into a room thinking 'I'm looking at Alec Soth's photography'. You'll be seeing it without any preconceptions."

Broomberg and Chanarin came up with the concept after reading Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* and Roberto Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, both of which use heteronyms. Having previously probed the notion of photographic "truth" in photography with projects such as *People in Trouble*, *The Day Nobody Died* and *Afterlife*, the idea appealed to them, but they say their main target was the contemporary art market and its reliance on the cult of the artist. In fact, Broomberg adds, the idea this project evolved logically out of previous work and that any artist should work in that way was one of the assumptions they were keen to resist.

"Photographers and artists have to behave in the way that brands behave now, they have to be instantly recognisable and







2

sustainable and rigorous and all the things that once were seen as wrong. There's this expectation that you're recognised because of your specific strategies or concerns or aesthetics; you're almost expected to produce this body of work that's a perfect reply to the last," he says. "It's like curators need artists to fulfil certain moments in their arguments, they need to be able to bring in Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar to illustrate this point, and to be able to rely on Alfredo to illustrate that point no matter which project they choose.

"We think artists should be allowed to be more reactionary, critical and agile, and break with their own strategies, so we thought it would be liberating for everybody [the artists they commissioned] not to be themselves for a while.

It's a kind of battle against the conservative model of the artist as the crazy, solitary, inspired figure, or the wild abstract expressionist expressing his inner turmoil, and against the way museums work now. High-grossing shows such as *Gauguin* at Tate Modern are like celebrity culture; *Alias* is a show of no-one you've ever heard of. You won't be able to come and see the celebrities."

"Artists are pushed towards this formation of a brand that is distinctive," adds Chanarin. "Continuity is rewarded by the art market because, if you want to buy a Tracey Emin, it's important it looks like a Tracey Emin. We wanted to resist that and push back against the notion of the artist as a brand, even as a profession. I question this idea of the artist as a professional,

that as an artist you go to university and learn art and get a gallery and do a show and Saatchi buys into it. There's this expectation of this trajectory photographers follow, and I find it quite disturbing. I don't find that being an artist is like being a doctor or dentist. This idea of a heteronym is a way of sidestepping the personality or cult of the artist."

Even so, he and Broomberg have got some pretty high-profile people involved, and say they knew they had to get big names on board to make the festival a success. But they only approached people whose work they admired, and included artists and filmmakers as well as writers and photographers, such as Gabriel Orozco, whose work is currently on show at Tate Modern, alongside David Goldblatt, Joan Fontcuberta, Juergen Teller, Polly

Braden and Broomberg and Chanarin themselves. The writers involved range from Pessoa to art critic Jennifer Higgie (co-editor of *Frieze* magazine) and oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee, who has recently written *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*. Pairing the writer with the artist happened organically, they say and, in some cases, the pairs have been working together for a while. Goldblatt asked to work with Ivan Vladislavic, for example, the novelist with whom he published a two-book project (featured elsewhere in this issue) and Braden worked with her partner, writer and academic David Company – although the couple have "mixed up their practice", says Broomberg, and taken different roles to what you might expect.



He and Chanarin enjoyed the commissioning process and it felt natural to them, he adds – because they’ve worked as a partnership for so long, and because of their time on *Colors* magazine, where they worked as creative directors early in their careers. “When two people produce work together, it’s like a third person emerges, so there’s always a level of personal anonymity. And coming from an editorial background, the idea of commissioning is quite familiar to us and really enjoyable. It feels so generous to say ‘Here’s some money, go out and do something that you want to do.’”

Mystery tour

In most commissions, the editor knows roughly what the outcome will be. In this case, Broomberg and Chanarin had no idea, and they say



2 *House of Coates*, 2006.
Image courtesy Lester B Morrison (otherwise known as Alex Soth).

3 *Légion étrangère, 5. de la série “EMPIRE”* 2006. *Portraits photographiques et uniformes*, © Charles Fréger on show at the Bukier Sztuki.



4



6

the outcomes have always been surprising. One pairing dressed up as 1970s' conceptual artists and inserted themselves into landscape photographs, for example, while another documented (or said they documented) the expat party scene in Kabul. Another invented a woman called Dora Flabot, a Jewish photographer who took intimate nude studies in the Warsaw Ghetto, which slowly took on an erotic element. Flabot couldn't get hold of fixer or negatives, so her work exists as unstable paper negatives, the story goes. Her work will be exhibited between sheets of red glass, but in fact the images are perfectly secure and were shot in modern-day London. Broomberg and Chanarin have previously pointed out how unreliable photographs are as evidence but, this time, they're taking in the text and institutions surrounding

photography too, presenting the work with fictional captions and text panels, and trying to keep the real authors a secret. The 23 exhibitions will be spread over Krakow, in locations such as the old Jewish synagogue, a medieval tower and a former stained-glass factory.

Liz Jobey, associate editor of *Granta*, is helping Broomberg and Chanarin create the festival catalogue, which will include just one image from each commissioned project and the full text submitted by each writer, some of which stretch to 15,000 words. Published in a small, pocket-book format, the curators hope festival visitors will enjoy them as short stories. "It will be an interesting read, you'll be able to take it home and really get into it," says Broomberg. "I hope people will get caught up in it."

The survey exhibition will take place in the Bunkier Sztuki



5

contemporary art gallery, and will include more than 50 artists. Here the fictional author will be presented with their biography but Broomberg and Chanarin will also include a one-line “reveal”, stating who the real inventor was. Even so, they’ve found another twist on the question of the heteronym and the institution, because they’ll be showing installation shots of the works in situ elsewhere rather than the real thing. “It’s an idea that came up out of financial restrictions [the sheer cost of transporting and insuring Duchamp and all the rest] but it’s one we’ve grown to love,” says Chanarin. “It’s another spin on the idea of the original.”

Chanarin expects many people will be taken in by the exhibitions, and some may be angry, adding that even he and Broomberg have got confused at times. It’s human instinct to want to be told stories

and believe them, he says, but he stops short of the extreme scepticism of post-modernism, which suspected “truth” was merely a succession of grand narratives. “Adam and I gave a talk at the What’s Next conference in Amsterdam, and we said that we still believe suffering deserves a witness,” he says. “That implies pictures have a truth value of some kind. There are atrocities happening right now and people are taking pictures of them, and those pictures have a value, a real value, as evidence.

“But the point isn’t whether art has truth or not. The point is that it’s important images are examined and we debate them.” *BJP*

Krakow Photomonth 2011 takes place from 13 May until 12 June, and includes an exhibition by Self Publish, Be Happy, the Sittcomm Award for Central and Eastern European artists and the Showoff Section, featuring 23 exhibitions by young Polish artists.
www.photomonth.com
www.choppedliver.info

4-5 Dr. Fasqiya-Ul Junat in a training camp to the north of Mazar-e-Sharif. © Al Zur, 2003, courtesy Juan Foncuberta.

Dr. Fasqiya-Ul Junat accompanied by his bodyguard visits an Al Qaida position in the Tora Bora mountains. © Al Zur, 2003, courtesy Juan Foncuberta, on show at the Bukier Sztuki.

6 Susan Lipski, 1947-1998, Self-portrait as the gangster Bonnie Parker as a Jewish artist, 1985. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Ein Harod, on show at the Bukier Sztuki.