



NEWSMAKER

ADAM BROOMBERG AND OLIVER CHANARIN

Broomberg & Chanarin claim never to have worked with photography “in the normal way.” When the London-based duo traveled to Afghanistan, embedded with the British army, they came back with abstract pictures produced by exposing photographic paper to sunlight each time something worth recording in photojournalistic terms happened. The resulting swathes of lyrical colors poignantly suggested the impossibility of portraying the horror of war. Broomberg & Chanarin, curators of **Photomonth Krakow**, which opens May 5, spoke to *Modern Painters* U.K. editor Coline Milliard about their unconventional approach.

Coline Milliard: *For Photomonth you’ve invited*

writers to dream up fictional artists, and artists to create the works these characters would have made. How did you get this idea?

Oliver Chanarin: While reading the works of Fernando Pessoa and Roberto Bolaño. Bolaño’s book *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is an anthology of invented right-wing authors. When we started our research, we discovered artists who had adopted this strategy. For Aalam Wassef, an Egyptian artist, it was a political strategy born of necessity. For years he was unable to make works under his own name for fear of being imprisoned and tortured.

Adam Broomberg: So he invented a pseudonym, Ahmad Sherif, who then made a series of anti-

Mubarak YouTube clips. They gathered huge support, hundreds of thousands of hits. Yesterday he told us that he has come out of the closet.

OC: A motivation for this curatorial strategy is to push back against this idea of the artist as a brand.

CM: *How did you approach the artists and writers?*

OC: There wasn’t a system. The pairings that work best are the ones where there was already a relationship between the writer and the artist, like Gabriel Orozco and Siddhartha Mukherjee, or Céline Condorelli and Avery Gordon.

AB: The question remains: Is it at all possible to become someone else?

OC: That is why we are also doing a survey show, >>

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in the Bunkier Sztuki gallery, in which we've tried to assemble historical examples of artists who have invented aliases.

AB: Artists as diverse as Sophie Calle, Roni Horn, and Marcel Duchamp's *Rose Sélavy*.

OC: We'll be using installation shots instead of original artworks, which is an approach that came out of budget constraints. But we quickly fell in love with the idea—to elevate the installation shot to the status of an artwork in itself. The shots will be blown up so that works inside will be one-to-one in scale. When you browse through the catalogue, it'll look like one single building with many strange rooms.

AB: It really fits in with our interest in the relationship between photography and reality and how fiction permeates everything.

CM: For your latest project, *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground, 2011*, you've worked with *Belfast Exposed*, a gallery with an archive of professional and amateur photographs taken during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. How did you start working on this collection?

OC: They invited us. We went to Belfast and spent a weekend hanging out in this very small room that contains the archive. It struck us immediately as a completely fascinating collection of images.

AB: We'd never seen that before. If you look at a professional's contact strip, it'll be a straight series of riot shots, whereas this went from kids

kissing to pictures of a riot and back to kissing. You can see the bizarre routine of somebody's day in West Belfast. We've always maintained that life goes on in conflict zones, but here was evidence of it. The archive was also accessible to the public for many years. People could go in and look through these albums of contact sheets, and behind them were the negatives. They started interacting with the images, scratching, erasing parts of them. Some professional photo editors, activists, and lawyers also came to the archive looking for images, and they put dots on the ones they were interested in.

OC: That area under the dot was rendered invisible, almost censored. And that's what we've blown up and printed—hence the round format. It's a game of chance. They are images that are composed not by us but by the people looking for images. For *The Day that Nobody Died, 2008*, the project we did in Afghanistan, the composition was determined by the sunlight. So again there's this question of authorship.

CM: You've been very critical of the idea of photojournalism as a proof of the photographer being there—particularly in your essay "*Unconcerned but not Indifferent*." Yet your choice of working in conflict zones is already highlighting a situation.

AB: Yes, but what we are saying is that the performative element is as important as what you bring back. The act of witnessing can happen



FROM LEFT:
Adam Broomberg and **Oliver Chanarin**
Culture 3 Sheet 72, 2010. C-print, 75 x 59 in.

April to August 1993_6_sheet2, 2010. C-print, 59 x 75 in.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:
Untitled (Right Arm), 2010. C-print, 8 x 10 in.

in a number of ways. That project in Afghanistan was definitely driven by a need to experience the situation in a very traditional sense, but what we produced challenged the notion of photographic evidence. We have a real problem with the system of being embedded and the fact that most images are driven by the market. Editors are answering to advertisers, and that's the way we are seeing these wars.

OC: Although the Internet has changed that a lot, with civilian journalism.

AB: The reaction to the position we took in that essay was very negative. It turned into this noxious and unproductive thing about these two pretentious guys versus the people who are putting their lives in danger to bring back those images.

OC: We firmly believe that human suffering should be recorded, witnessed, photographed, and published.

AB: But it's about how it's disseminated, and about who's in control of how these pictures are made. The World Press Photo is so powerful. All the young photojournalists look at those award

winners, and it determines the way the next event is imaged. It's a self-perpetuating machine.

OC: We are not producing work that could be seen as an alternative to photojournalism, but it has been read that way at times, as a provocation.

AB: Which it's not. It's entering a debate. We had a tough time last year in Beirut when we showed our "Chicago," 2006.

CM: *That's your series of photographs of a fake Arab city used for training by the Israeli army.*

AB: Yes, somebody even described the work as "getting skewered." When we exhibited this series in America, we got sued by the Anti-Defamation League. We've tried endlessly to show these works in Israel, but nobody will do it. When we showed them at Home Works, in Beirut, there were a lot of complaints during the artists' talk about the fact that we were producing commodified artworks out of such a situation, which people found a deeply unradical strategy. The audience was asking us, "What's your position on the occupation?" And we were like, "What don't you understand about two Jewish men showing works in a Beirut context about how the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] works?"

CM: *You produced abstract pictures in Afghanistan, and in Belfast you selected other people's images. It's as if you've distanced yourself from imagemaking.*

OC: Our next project, *War Primer II*, continues this trajectory. *War Primer* is a book that Bertolt Brecht made while in exile in Finland during World War II. He started cutting pictures out of the newspapers. He felt that they were presented as simple things when in fact they were very difficult to read. He talked about these images as hieroglyphics he wanted to decode—by writing four-line poems about each of the images.

AB: So we've been looking at as many newspapers from 9/11 to now as we can and figuring out how the major moments in these past 10 years have been depicted. If Brecht were alive, he would be trolling the Internet, so we are also going to have a moving-image component, including videos made by insurgents and people in the streets filming with their mobile phones.

CM: *And you are going to write poems?*

AB: Yes, we are taking on Brecht!



PRIVATE VIEW LOS ANGELES

Art of Bleach



"I'm a jeans and T-shirt kind of girl," says Los Angeles-based artist **Heather Cook**, explaining her fondness for working with simple materials like denim and cotton jersey.

Her wall pieces, which Cook says exist somewhere between painting and sculpture, are made by rumpling jersey fabric and spraying it with bleach. The smoothed material retains the afterimage of the folds and wrinkles. "It's very much a photographic effect," she says. Tacked flat to the wall, the pieces seem to have topographical depth, akin to the trompe l'oeil Tauba Auerbach achieves on canvas. Occasionally printed on the surface of the cloth are numbered directions for how to repackage it for archival storage—a reference, the artist says, to the amount of time she spends folding fabric, as well as a nod to Andy Warhol's "Dance Diagrams." Cook's redefining of what constitutes a canvas recalls the work of Sergej Jensen; she also names Blinky Palermo, Sigmar Polke, and Cosima von Bonin as inspirations. Various bleach works will be on display at **David Kordansky Gallery**, in Los Angeles, in the artist's debut solo show May 14 through June 18. Although she has flirted with incorporating canvas and linen, the versatile jersey feels right to her at the moment—not least, she says, because the omnipresence of American Apparel has given it status as a quintessentially L.A. fabric. "The colors are a readymade—everything's already inherent in the material; nothing is added," Cook says of her workaday medium. "When you bleach the fabric, it looks like it has a sheen. There's this illusionistic quality: It looks like satin or some really expensive material." —SCOTT INDRISEK

Heather Cook
Untitled, 2010. Bleach on cotton jersey and push pins, 70½ x 66 in.