

PEOPLE IN TROUBLE LAUGHING PUSHED TO THE GROUND

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By Nick Aikens

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground*, a publication comprising more than 200 images – 33 of which formed their eponymous exhibition at Paradise Row – followed an invitation to respond to the archive of *Belfast Exposed*. Founded in 1983 as a community photography initiative, this comprises more than half a million images – a mixture of professional and amateur – which offer a history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland as seen through the eyes (or lens) of those communities most affected. Until 2003 the archive was largely uncategorized and remained open to the public to visit. As a result prints and contact sheets have been tampered with, either by archivists who used coloured stickers to indicate selected photographs or by people who sought to remove themselves from public record by scrawling over faces.

Based on these moments of demarcation and interference, the publication includes 196 untitled 10x8” prints, each with a circular image in the centre showing the blown-up image obscured by the archivist's apparently randomly placed sticker. Scenes of tension sit alongside the everyday and indecipherable: masked men; a car set ablaze; teenagers kissing; a man jogging; obstructed bodies. The original photographer, the people and scenes documented and the reasons for their selection remain undefined – this is an anonymous, fragmented and partial index of both the Troubles and the Belfast archive itself. Flicking through the book initiates a guessing game, a quest for actual events amongst a Morse code of dots without dashes – I felt what Walter Benjamin described as the ‘unruly desire’ to know the stories within the photograph. Read within the context of the South African, London-based artists' work, which has shifted from photojournalism to a wider practice that is now situated firmly within the art world (this month they will curate their first large-scale exhibition, ‘Photomonth’ in Krakow), prevailing discourses surrounding documentary photography's truth-value and contemporary art's relentless archive fever, the dots are more investigation

into the medium rather than political provocation. As foreign artists parachuted in to this loaded history, such a stance is probably wise.

At Paradise Row the 30 prints were presented in a single line of sleek Perspex cases. The selection was revealing: *Untitled (Car on Fire)*, *Untitled (People Saluting)* and *Untitled (Women Grieving)* (all works 2010) convey the tension and emotion of the conflict. Punctuating these were moments that were sometimes playful, such as a hoard of balloons escaping across the sky, or quirky, like *Untitled (Chair Balancing on a Stick)*. Certain motifs reappear, such as outstretched arms or people covering their faces. The line of images balanced photographic and archival enquiry with astute formal choices, underscoring the aestheticization that takes place in the transfer from book to show.

At the back of the publication are ten images where negatives have been defaced (within the Belfast Exposed archive these negatives are in files with contact sheets meaning these acts of erasure are largely symbolic). On the back wall of the gallery was a blown-up image of a blonde woman with a line of felt tip covering her eyes with alarming precision – a conflict cover girl of sorts that recalled the artists' blurring of ethnographic study and fashion-photography techniques in their 2007 publication *Fig. Two*. Two other large-format works were also included, one of which shows a milk riot in the suburbs of Belfast, a carton suspended in midair (*Political 1 Sheet 19*) – a moment of frozen chaos made eerily seductive.

Context and presentation are of course always determining factors in an image's reception and resonance. Next year Broomberg and Chanarin will show a selection of the prints at Belfast Exposed. Their choices will again be revealing – away from the commercial gallery this iteration of the project and its future within the archive (the artists are donating an edition of the prints to BE) may provide a more fruitful context from which to assess how the work informs its source material, operating as a less self-reflexive, more politically reactive body of work.

<http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/adam-broomberg-and-oliver-chanarin/>