

This month, photographers
Adam Broomberg &
Oliver Chanarin will
curate the main
programme of
Photomonth in
Krakow, Poland.
Titled *Alias*, their
programme features
artists and writers
collaborating to
produce a fictional
third person
whose work will be
exhibited in the
show. They term
this 'a respite from
being oneself'.

WORDS: DAVID CAMPANY

David Campany: The starting point for your latest curatorial project is Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa's literary concept of the 'heteronym' – a fictitious persona invented to enable writing or creation from a new perspective. For Pessoa this was a kind of knight's move to escape habit, even to mock the notion of a 'signature style'. You have invited 23 writers to collaborate with artists, to invent heteronyms that then make art. Do you know what you're getting yourselves into?

Adam Broomberg + Oliver Chanarin: Yes, trouble. But when we began our research we quickly discovered that the fictional persona was, and still is, a more common strategy in modern and contemporary art than we'd first imagined. Pessoa, and also Roberto Bolaño's fictional anthology *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, showed us just how helpful the fictitious persona can be when approaching moral and political territory too terrifying to honestly explore in your own skin. That led us to the work of Brian O'Doherty, author of *Inside the White Cube*, who for over 30 years made art under the name of Patrick Ireland. He invented Patrick Ireland after the Bloody Sunday massacres in 1972 and made a pledge to continue to inhabit this 'heteronym' until the British withdrew from Northern Ireland. These conditions finally fulfilled in 2007, Patrick was buried in a real grave under the lawn of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin a year later. From here, we quickly began accumulating other examples of artists who have engaged this strategy.

DC: Such as whom?

AB + OC: Marcel Duchamp (as Rose Sélavy), Sophie Calle (as Paul Auster's Maria), Walid Raad (as The Atlas Group), Richard Prince (as John Dogg), Alec Soth (as Lester B Morrison), Simon Fujiwara (as his father)... We'll be showing all of these, and more, in Krakow. This is traditionally a photography festival, but don't just expect photographs. 'We never disembark from ourselves,' complained Pessoa. And we wanted to give artists a chance to disembark. So, as you say, we've asked writers and artists to collaborate: the writer's task was to invent a fictional character and the artist was required to inhabit this person and make their work. [The 23 commissions will be dotted around different spaces in the city.] We didn't realise how difficult this task was going to be for the artists. Luckily! It would be rather depressing if an artist were able to effortlessly abandon their political, aesthetic or moral concerns. Yet most of the people we approached jumped at the opportunity to be somebody else – to break from the exhausting task of being themselves, and from their own artistic practice. We have the sense that artists are increasingly being forced to behave more and more like brands do, and we wanted to offer some resistance to this tendency, to the tyranny of the professional curators!





DC: When the show is presented, will it be declared who the ‘real’ artists/writers are? Or will these heteronyms be given the opportunity to stand on their own two feet? In other words, are you interested in this as an exercise or as a potential for a genuine departure? Despite its history of pseudonyms and heteronyms, art doesn’t seem to be a field in which either makers or audiences are comfortable with the erasure of the author. They don’t mind authorship being a bit elastic or put in temporary jeopardy, but they do mind if the elastic snaps altogether. Can this be overcome?

AB + OC: We argued back and forth about this, and finally decided to keep the identities of the real artists and writers out of the equation. Our goal was for a complete separation of the real and fictional artist – we knew the whole process would be short-circuited by having the true identity revealed immediately. At the same time, we didn’t want it to turn into a superficial game of who did what. If the exercise is a success, if the artists are able to briefly abandon their usual mode of production, then you should never be able to match up the heteronym and the real artist. This remains to be seen. The festival organisers – Karol Hordziej and Tomasz Gutkowski among others – have taken a big risk in supporting our experiment. And in many ways it’s an experiment that is set up to fail. We are willing it to fail. As we said before, it would be worrying if we were able to so completely abandon our own practice. But this is turning into an interview. We want to ask you a question: As you are one of the commissioned writers/artists, how have you found the process? Were you able to overcome your own logic?

DC: Respecting your spirit of separation, I’ll answer without revealing too much about the work Polly Braden and I have been making. Like you two, we have made work jointly in the past, and in many ways I think good collaborations involve the invention of a third artistic identity, not unlike a heteronym, able to produce work that is more than the sum of its parts and that would not have been made by either individual alone (somehow we imagined this was part of your attraction to the idea). So on that level it’s not been such a leap. We also decided to scramble the division between ‘writer’ and ‘artist’. I am somewhat shaped by a generation of people who fought very hard to be both; Polly less so, but we concocted our heteronymic artist together and we’re making the art together. Without getting all poststructural, we find making and thinking art fairly heterogeneous anyway. My own art doesn’t really have a ‘signature style’, and with my writing I always feel like I’m trying on new hats, new forms. Likewise, Polly is ‘known’ for certain kinds of observational photography, but she’s also collaborated with other artists to photograph their performances and installations, and also works with journalists. Maybe this is because we’re both involved with photography primarily, which is such a dispersed, promiscuous medium belonging to everybody and nobody. But we’re curious to see how others have responded to your invitation.

AB + OC: Us too! We have teamed up some remarkable and odd couples; Gabriel Orozco has been working with the oncologist and author of *The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, Siddhartha Mukherjee. Jeremy Deller has been working with writer Jennifer Higgie, while Johan Grimonprez is taking on

Pessoa himself. As regards the focus on photography, we have been less concerned with presenting photographs as work that engages with the politics of the medium. In our central exhibition in the Bunkier Sztuki we are ‘using’ photography rather than showing photographs. Our strategy is to print and display installation photographs of all of the works featured, rather than the originals. It’s a celebration of flatness, you could say, in which the installation photograph is elevated to the status of a work in itself. Where possible they will be printed on a 1:1 scale! And we will not be showing original videos either but so-called ‘viewing copies’, which are low resolution. When installation photographs are not available we are also using the ‘official views’ of objects. This term ‘Official View’ is curious. It’s used by the Tate Modern archive to describe photographs of works of art approved by the artists or curators. It’s a strategy that actually arose out of financial constraints, but one that we’ve come to love.

DC: Perhaps Walter Benjamin was right: the significance of ‘art photography’ will always be overshadowed by the significance of the ‘photography of art’. And it’s interesting that historically photography has always emerged as the crucial medium in discussions not just about reproduction and originality, but also about authorship, anonymity, authenticity, agency, the status of the document, quotation, appropriation, value, democracy, dissemination and so forth. It’s the medium that prompted art to rethink what’s at stake in those concepts, but it has also proved to be the medium best placed to articulate and express them too. On the subject of copies of copies, did you invent a heteronym who then selected the artists and writers, or did you do it ‘yourselves’? Maybe you shouldn’t answer that one.

AB + OC: Yes, the curators are fictional too. :

Alias is on show in Krakow, Poland, 13 May–12 June

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE, EACH PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *Afterlife*, 2009

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *Fig 15*, 2007

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *Untitled (Pushed to the Ground)*, 2011

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *42/Sheet 3*, 2011

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *27 September 1996/Sheet 27/Frame 9*, 2011

Above images courtesy Paradise Row Gallery, London

Lester B. Morrison, *House of Coates (detail)*, 2011. Courtesy and © the artist

assume vivid astro focus, *Homocrap #1*, 2005, mixed media installation part of the exhibition *Ecstasy: In and About Altered States*, curated by Paul Schimmel, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles
Photo: Josh White. Courtesy and © the artist

Leila Hakmat, *Humor of Initiation Version 1* (still), 2009, 14:11 minute, two-channel colour video installation.
Courtesy and © the artist

Brian O’Doherty, *The Burial of Patrick Ireland*, 2008. Photo: Fionn McCann. Courtesy and © the artist

The Bruce High Quality Foundation, *Thank You New York*, Empire, 2009. Courtesy and © the artist

Barbara Hammer, *Lover Other*, 2006. Courtesy and © the artist