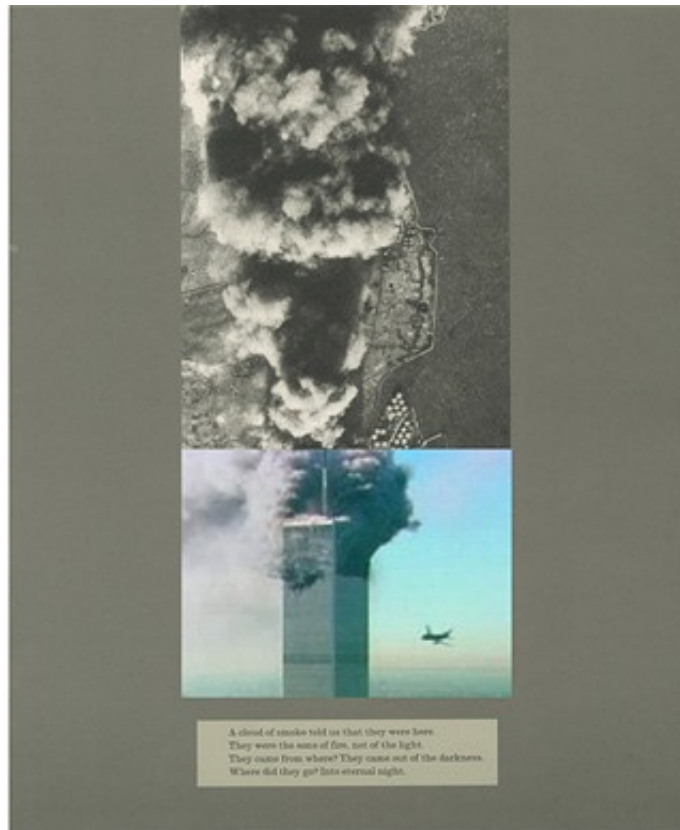


The new war poets: the photographs of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin are among the artists shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for their book *War Primer 2*, a reinterpretation of Bertolt Brecht's 1955 original



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Plate 23. Aircraft, at right, is seen as it is about to fly into the World Trade Center in New York on Tuesday. The aircraft was the second to fly into the tower Tuesday morning.

<http://www.forrestmarketing.com/worldtradecenters/attack.html>, 2011 Photo: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

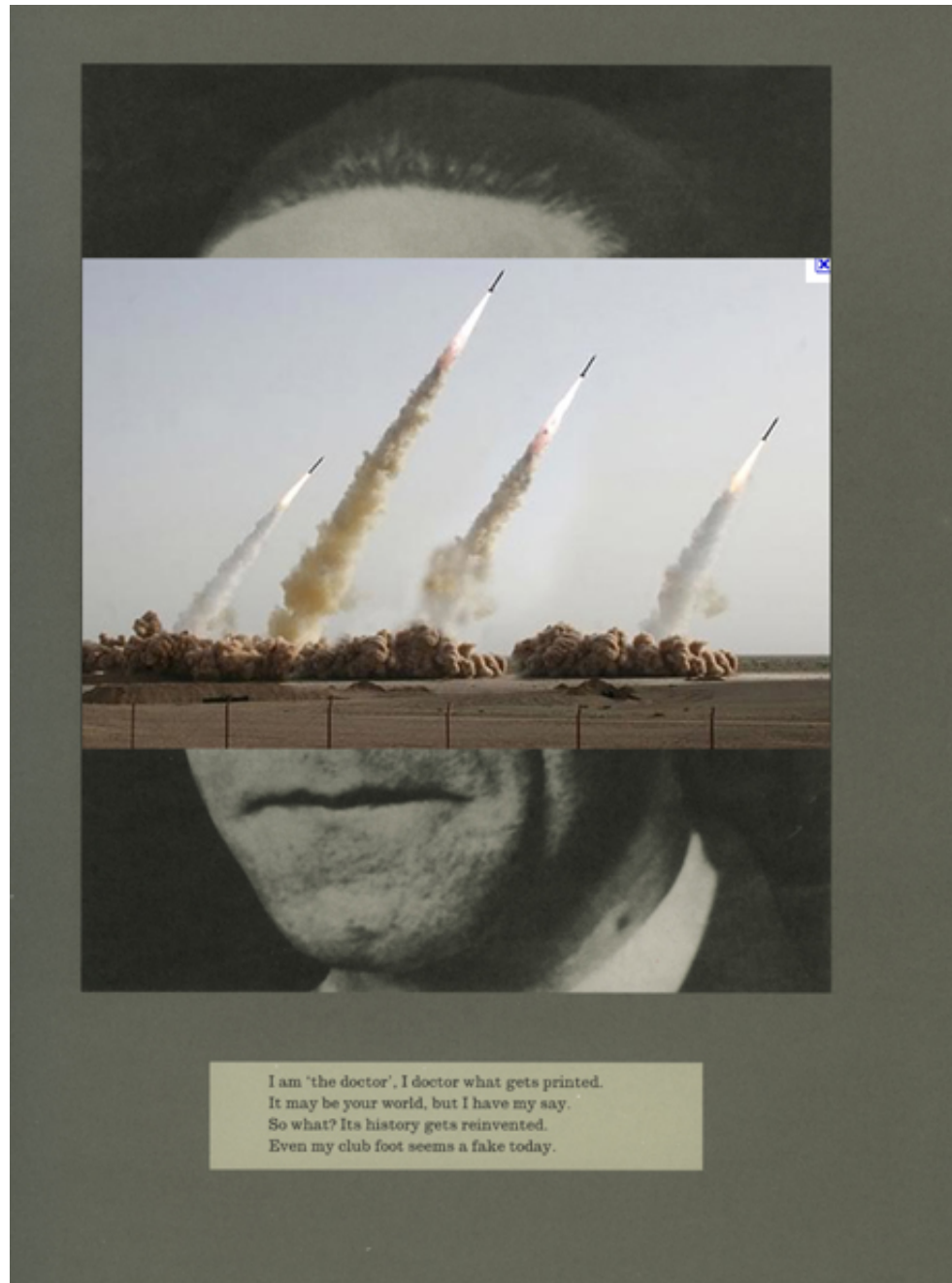
By Lucy Davies

7:00AM GMT 29 Mar 2013

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin – the photographic duo known as Adam & Olly – met aged 20 in Wuppertal, a tiny missionary town in South Africa's desert Cape. As road-tripping sociology and philosophy students, 'We were quite far off from taking pictures,' Chanarin says. 'I'm not sure what we were into; mostly smoking pot.'

Even now, aged 41, they aren't classic photographers, preferring something more 'philosophical and political', Broomberg says. 'Our lives are so consumed by images that it's important to understand the way they work: emotionally, politically, culturally, economically.'

Although they began by taking photographs for magazines and newspapers, their particular approach to conflict soon pushed them into a gallery context. 'We began to feel uncomfortable about how naive our subjects were about the power of an image, that a photograph is a piece of currency that has an afterlife. We wanted to make work that critiqued that.'



The two have been nominated for this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for their publication War Primer 2, inspired by Bertolt Brecht's original War Primer (1955), in which he reprinted photographs from wartime mass-circulation magazines, replacing the captions with short poems about the essential truth of each image.

'Our project was a continuation of his concerns,' Broomberg says. 'He was obsessed with how opaque photographs were. He called them hieroglyphics, and 70 years later we are further away from understanding how images work than they were back then.'

To create their book, Broomberg and Chanarin secured 100 original copies of the 1995 English edition of Brecht's work, and set about appropriating its pages. 'We tried producing our own poems, but we soon realised Brecht was a far better poet than we could ever be,' Chanarin says. In the end, Brecht himself provided the solution. 'He had written, "Don't start with the good old things, start with the bad new ones", and in that spirit we looked at today's "poor" images – those compressed or reformatted into tiny files for internet use.'

They spent months collecting images, trying each with the original poems until they discerned a resonance between the two. 'Sometimes it felt too gratuitous, or too violent, or too easy,' Chanarin says, 'but when it felt right it was glaringly obvious to everyone.' The final 100 works were created by hijacking the original books, a process they found incredibly laborious. 'The photographs were stuck in by hand, using an army of interns. It was a military operation,' Broomberg says. Each book took weeks to make, but they decided to recreate the work as a free e-book too, downloadable from their website. 'We never wanted the book to be an exclusive object: that would be really anti-Brechtian,' Chanarin says.



You see me here, eating a simple stew
 Me, slave to no desire, except for one:
 World-conquest. That is all I want. From you
 I have but one request: give me your sons.

Neither of them feels that what they are doing should replace photojournalism. 'The images of the Vietnam War actually changed its course,' Broomberg says. 'We still believe firmly that human suffering needs to be reported and documented. War Primer 2 is an attempt to think a little bit more deeply about what makes up images of war. It asks why history coagulates around certain images, how an image becomes the image.'

The Deutsche Börse Photography Prize exhibition, the Photographers' Gallery, London W1, April 19 to June 30 (thephotographersgallery.org.uk). Telegraph Subscriber Privilege Card holders can enter a draw for two tickets to the award evening on June 10, plus a catalogue each. Visit telegraph.co.uk/subscriber

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2013