

Broomberg & Chanarin

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UNE CONVERSATION AVEC ADAM BROOMBERG & OLIVER CHANARIN

Rémi Coignet for Le Monde

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Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin have been working together for twenty years. Throughout the series, they have built one of the densest and most works conceptually well documented among the artists of their generation. Their main topics are the photographic medium itself and the power in all its incarnations. They have just received the Deutsche Börse Prize for War Primer 2 when Holy Bible is nominated for the Paris Photo Book-Aperture Foundation. Encounter in their studio in the East End of London.

Rémi Coignet: Neither one nor the other did not do a photography school or art. You, Adam you studied sociology and art history, and you, Oliver, philosophy and artificial intelligence. I want to know what led you to photography?

Adam Broomberg: As a child, I went to a Jewish school. At age 12, I received a camera as a birthday gift. In an attempt to earn some money, I designed small maps that I photographed the Bar Mitzvah. But no one has hired me! [Laughs] It was my first photographic experience. In addition, my brother spent a lot of time in the darkroom. Living in South Africa also played. Photography was there with very political movements such as the Bang-Bang Club. Censorship there was powerful. Photography has always been important in this country. She could never be taken lightly.

Oliver Chanarin: I was inspired by my father, I think, when I was a teenager, he changed my room in the lab! He mounted in the middle of a wall part. On one side, he left my bed and the other, he had a darkroom. He taught me to shoot and he instilled in me a love of photography. But that's when I started working with Adam Colors Magazine I am interested in color photography. I discovered the world of press photography, documentary, fashion. After a few years working in Colors, I felt the urgent need to produce my own photos. And this is where Adam and I started to photograph together.

RC: From your first book, Trust (2000), consisting of portraits of people in nearby states of hypnosis, you ask the photographic medium, the concept of portraiture, can go beyond appearances, the photographer / photographed relationship. From the outset this medium you appeared there a problem?

AB: Yes. Trust is interesting. Although we did not fully understand the subject is the confidence and the power of the photographer on her. Trust deals with loss of consciousness of the subject mired in a general aesthetics on which it has no power. We have somehow come full circle. It really is always our concern to understand how photography, especially portrait is linked to power, measure how the person behind the camera is in a position of power. You know, photography, from its origins, was thought to participate in police work, cataloging, archiving and control. Alphonse Bertillon and what follows. Although our consciousness was only partial, we were concerned about the medium. At times, we retreated before restarting. We were filled with doubts, then we found some confidence before our doubts come back.

OC: To say that we have accomplished this rocking motion is very fair. We lived, I think, because we fed real skepticism about the photographic medium. But at the same time terribly deceived us. We saw him as a fairly magical activity. And take pictures we seemed quite mysterious ...

AB: And also necessary. Because, you know, the events require a witness. Photography can be the witness. There is therefore also a medium of political urgency.

RC: In your three books, Ghetto (2003), Mr. Mkhize's portrait ... (2004) and Chicago (2006) shooting various realities. But in these books you accompany the images of long texts, giving voice to the people photographed, for example. Was it to stabilize the meaning of the images with the words?

OC: Chicago is a little different from the other two. But what is Ghetto and Mr. Mkhize's ... we have operated in a very traditional setting of colonial photography. We went to distant places to take portraits with a view camera. So we were in the very traditional relationship of the photographer about it. But this asymmetric power relationship that Adam spoke seemed problematic. We thought we could get around it by having a conversation with our subjects. It's as simple as that. Give the name of the person, rather than categorize, for example: say Mr. Mkhize instead of migrant worker and try to make a little bit account of what he thinks it possible to reverse this very traditional practice photography.

AB: We recently did some research on August Sander. And if you compare his contemporary Helmar Lerski, Sander was very humanistic in its understanding that can communicate much of the dignity of a person and his life portrait. And Lerski was the opposite: he thought that we photograph the surface of the skin. He showed these details with 60 photos of the same face. Both worked at the same time, using the same strategies, but had very different readings. So I think we used the words to cancel the photos somehow.

OC: The feeling grew in us that photography was very bad to tell stories or give an overall picture of a situation. We have always been more interested in what is happening outside the frame of the image. The words were somehow a way to give more wealth to the experience on the ground. What the pictures do not seem able to do.

AB: The photos are so liquid. They are not beholden to anyone. They have no sense of commitment. It is therefore the root. You rarely see a picture without text. Many photographers claim to be unable to communicate with words, but the day you will see a picture without a form of text, tell me. There is always this relationship, whether a title, name, date or technical information. This text is part of the work ...

OC: And this type of discordant relationship between images and texts we have emphasized in Chicago where, somehow, the images are not absolutely meaningless if you do not know the context.

AB: The idea behind this project was to say that these are not just artists or photographers who use aesthetic strategies. They are also the governments. So each chapter is devoted to Chicago several specific aesthetic strategies that the State of Israel has used to communicate. For example, the chapter on planted on Arab villages destroyed forests. The Israelis learned this from Poland. A forest communicates notions of sublime beauty, innocence, eternity, is not it?

RC: Yes, of course.

AB: So it's a clever aesthetic strategy covering the villages destroyed by the nature after five years it becomes the most innocent place in the world.

OC: Take Chicago itself. When it runs this place, it seems to be in a movie. We had the opportunity to photograph during military maneuvers. But we have not taken this course, because we were interested in was the architecture of the occupation, the way the buildings impose themselves as a military force. Thinking Chicago as a kind of stage plays where the relationship between Israel and its enemies, we realized that it was a fantasy projection. The projection of the national fantasy of a city devoid of Arab population.

AB: When you look at Chicago I do not know how many chapters there are, it looks like it is made ??by seven or eight different photographers. There are still life photographs, judicial style photos, photos of architecture, nature, models ...

OC: In a way we do not have style. We are like pickpockets. [Chuckles] We adopt a style and attitude that suit on ...

AB: ... and the question. It was difficult to understand our work because people expect a recognizable aesthetic strategy to be able to say "ah, this is so and so!"

OC: This is what it means to the world of art. And perhaps the world of photography as well: we can say is August Sander, is a Helmar Lerski, is a Martin Parr. But we have always resisted this temptation. We have always tried not to fall into the trap of repeating ourselves. We do not like it.

AB: In a way, this is related to our skepticism of the medium. If we want to continue to challenge, to question, we must continue to question how we use it. Sometimes it is appropriate to have a single black and white negative

20x25 paper. Other times of low-resolution digital images agree. And we used one as the other. It all depends on what one wants to communicate.

OC: This may give the impression that we are not very concentrated. And it's true that we are bored pretty quickly. But I think if you look at all these projects with a little distance, we begin to see a larger view. I think the themes have emerged ...

RC: Of course.

OC: And they emerged fairly unconscious. One of the main themes of our practice, Adam mentioned earlier, our concern is the use of photography by the government.

RC: In fact, all your books raise the question of power. Political power, the power to shut the power of the photographer on her ... To put this question of power you often had to negotiate, outwit the authorities, obtain authorizations. And you have seen that being authorized to act by giving you the power to turn your power over your subjects. This poses there a moral issue, in the sense that Jean-Luc Godard said that traveling is a matter of morality?

AB: Yes. And I think that's why we continued to operate in this mode. For example, in a psychiatric hospital a person is subjected to drugs. And those who have power have allowed us to take pictures. , We ask about " Can we take your picture? " And he accepts, but does not control the political power, cultural, moral and financial image. This is immoral. In every sense of the word. More recently, our projects have focused on the structure of the photograph and how itself can be problematic. Godard, in the late 1970s, was invited to create a TV channel by Samora Machel, the Marxist leader then in power in Mozambique. And he said: " Forget about the Western model of television " . And his first statement was: " I refuse to use Kodak film because it is a racist brand. "

You know the story of Kodak? Just after the end of segregation in the United States, it was noted that if you took a picture of a white child and a black child that was exposed on the white child, was there any black children than white eyes and teeth. The chemistry of the film was not of sufficient magnitude to represent both. It is only when two of its major customers have complained, as Kodak has developed films that can make these shades: when the chocolate industry and the furniture, complained of not being able, for example, photographed the dark chocolate and white chocolate time, or a dark furniture did not appear!

Recently, we went to Gabon. It was a typical colonial project. But we used only outdated Godard films have described as racist. The films were so old that we came back with a single usable image. But this is a reflection on the medium and shows that something within the same material is potentially problematic.

OC: As Adam said, we are very interested in the ethics of the photographic medium. How this little piece of plastic in charge of chemistry Can incorporate special ethical issues? We stumbled upon this remarkable story: how Polaroid was involved in apartheid. A young man working for Polaroid, discovered that the company earned \$ 1 million per year by selling equipment to South Africa as the apartheid government used to achieve the ignominious pass books. All Blacks in South Africa had to hold the paper on which they were photographed from the front and in profile. And this with Polaroid equipment.

We managed to find one of these devices and we found they were literally designed for the function of data collection. They had a button to increase the power of the flash to properly make dark skin. The instructions explained in words that black skin absorb more light than white skin and therefore allow this button to have the correct rendering. We were stunned. This demonstrated perfectly for us how an ordinary photographic material contained in it an ethical dimension.

We decided to produce a series with this device but we deliberately took the floor against the manual. It said it was used for portraits: we refused to do portraits. It was written that he was still holding the camera to meter the subject: we have done, or close-ups, either seen from afar. We used the flash on things that were not dark. We decided to use this equipment in a manner opposite to its function. Instead to preserve its object monitoring role, we attempted to produce a love letter to the landscape of South Africa.

RC: Your work is obviously political. Would you say he is engaged as one might say, was that of Allan

Sekula?

AB: We live in a time different from where Allan Sekula worked. And I just saw one of its projects at MoMA.

OC: Which one?

AB: Fish Story . I think yes, we are committed. But the economic climate is different today. In 1970 or 80, you could be a teacher and earn a living and make a parallel job without any concession.

OC: I think if you look at the movies Sekula on the shipbuilding industry, there is a very strong relationship with our practice. It has influenced us a lot. It is one of our heroes in a sense. Because he was less interested in the images by saving the image.

AB: Yes!

OC: The overall structure of the industry that produces images and digests. In a sense we share this concern. Adam and I are not really interested in the photos. We are interested in how images are produced, they are distributed and received.

AB: Their ecosystem, rather than the images themselves.

RC: For me, Fig. (2007) marks a break in your work. A deep questioning of the ability of photography to document anything. What's going on?

OC: We have spent many years working everywhere around the world but never where we live here in England. We received a commission from Photoworks to work on the East of the country. And it was so difficult to devote ourselves to where we live. And in fact it was a failure. We could not build a project on the relationship of England to colonialism ...

AB: Yes, but the failure was not final. We developed an analysis of the imperial colonial power and its relationship to photography. Finally, there is, I think, two photos taken in England. But I do not really see it as a failure. During the past ten years we took so many photos! I think all these issues were already in our minds, even though we were not yet able to articulate.

RC: In . Fig come to light two concepts hitherto underlying: doubt and irony. For example, you show the hand of a man, supposedly the largest in the world, but the text says that the scale of the image does not prove the fact. This principle is reflected in doubt Black Market , which comes with a VHS tape supposed to be proof. But no one (or almost) of a VHS player. So it is almost impossible to verify what you say ... [laughs]

Is it important that the viewer doubt that the artist presents him?

OC: I think you're talking about here with the idea of ??fiction. The suggestion of a fiction. Even if the hand is really that of the greatest man in the world, even if we flew to Ukraine to take a picture of this man, Leonid, what interested us was not to make a photograph which can give an idea of ??its size. One of our favorite giant photos is that of Diane Arbus when we know that it is a giant next to him because his parents are very small. But if you removed the image of the concept of scale, you're lost. You're in a sea of ??doubts...

RC: And this is what the text says.

AB: The book consists of reproductions of 4x5 contacts and exposure too. Of course a small camera just so immediate image becomes a fiction ...

OC: One of the sources of this work was a story that Adam and I have read in the magazine Granta . The starting point was an excerpt from the diary of a British explorer who went in Tierra del Fuego. And he told this incredible story: he met the giant, extraordinary creatures that nobody had ever seen before. And he described how these people dancing around a fire. He had seen from the boat without ever setting foot on land. Of people left in search of these giants, and they could not find them. And it turned out that he had probably never seen. But somehow, this new world of Tierra del Fuego, this strange land was like a virgin area that was used as a projection screen. He projected his own imagination there ...

AB: But also the imagination of his contemporaries expected him. And that's what we ask the photographer is: it meets an expectation. This leads us to the question: what does it mean to be a witness, especially in a conflict zone? Subject that interests us. When will you be the witness? -What constitutes evidence? What constitutes information-or, more precisely, an analytical and critical information of a war?

Oliver and I have participated in a demonstration of a million people in 2003 against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, of course, the war took place. We look at the pictures in the newspapers and we could not believe how they were and how little clinical analysis of these images had to offer. So we embarked on the project *The Day Nobody Died* and *The Red House*. One being made ??in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. Their subject was really analyze the machine to produce images in conflict zones. There was this famous formula Susan Sontag that make pictures or make war are comparable activities. And of course they are related. These are two industries that operate in parallel.

RC: Is that why you chose to produce totally abstract in Afghanistan while you were "embedded" with the BBC accreditation images?

AB: I think that we analyzed there was the phenomenon of being "embedded". We probably do not have time to make history. But, as you probably know, during the first Gulf War in 1990, the United States has authorized any photojournalist. In Afghanistan, they realized they needed to enable them to be present. They have designed a system to control them. They then proposed access supposedly unprecedented front line. But in exchange, they demanded an unprecedented access to the work of photographers. So we said that, in a performative act, we would not resist producing images. But we reported a photographic material that was out there on the battlefield. And when we show in a museum, the Conservative panic, said "there are scratches, defects on the images". But in fact these scratches are proof ...

OC: I think you were talking about the role of the doubt, is central to this project also like the idea of ??fiction. Indeed, these photographic paper might as well be exposed here in London on the roof of the studio. Their truth is based on the authenticity of the artist's ability to tell a true story. To doubt the veracity of these images was, I think, very important for us in this case. For the question for us was what we saw. We are all surrounded by the images of newspapers and we absorb without much criticism. What interested us was to suggest to the viewer. It is the resistance of Marcel Duchamp retinal art. For him, art was a question of thinking, look no ...

AB: But to counterbalance your words Oliver, we must also say that we are very curious. And I wanted to know what it feels like on the front line of war. We have experienced this, and it was not pleasant. It was also to understand what it all means. What's it going in Iraq? It was to go and find things there. To go and see. Not necessarily to produce images that provide information to others, but to experience it for ourselves, to be there. At some point you look back and think the last fifteen years, the people you met, you think of all those lives ...

CB: Oh, there it is, you sound like an old man talking about it! [General laughter]

AB: No, but I mean it is not so cerebral. There is also a subjective and emotional aspect.

RC: Then you started to update War Primer Bertolt Brecht (a book in which he mixed press photos of World War II and short poems) with pictures of the so-called War on Terror found on the internet. Is photojournalism should be questioned or social use?

OC: I think War Primer 2 is a way, a celebration of photojournalism. *Nobody Died The Day* was seen as a criticism. But it was not. It was a criticism of "embedding" system rather than photojournalism. But War Primer 2 is sort of a celebration of a new era of photography at the age of the internet where appears a new ecology of images ...

AB: This is really a continuation of the project Brecht was an analysis of the photograph. His images of the bombing of Liverpool, his aerial photographs ... Imagine, in the 1940s, aerial views of a city being bombed. It was a pretty radical representation. Was it not?

RC: Indeed.

AB: The images of September 11, taken by tourists with a camera are just as radical. None of us can really understand, even more than a decade away. Brecht's work was both a narrative and an analysis of the

representation of the war and the functioning of the media industry. It was this famous formula: the images are hieroglyphics. They need to be decoded to be understood and I think we went in this direction.

OC: We also ask the same question: what image is enough? Brecht's concern, as Adam said, was that the images do not make sense. He could not understand. So, the solution was to associate them with poems. And purpose of poetry was to explain and complicate the photographic medium. We accepted this and thought it was fair. When we look at the contemporary images of the War on Terror with poems by Brecht, there is an immediate synergy. We realize then that the images are more complex than at first glance.

AB: I recently read the essay by Georges Didi-Huberman *War Primer*, and he writes that the photos are silent but Brecht, with his poems, suddenly makes loud. And in fact, Brecht intended to make an opera from *War Primer*. He composed five quatrains. Our next project is to complete to be 85, and then to work with the moving image and a contemporary composer. This is both an installation and performance. This is an opera or at least an operatic piece. It will be noisy. There will be no stillness of the silent picture.

RC: For the series *Portable Monuments*, you have established a grid of 20 questions that categorizes photos and establish an x and y for each question. Retype it and you by coloured cubes that form a meta-photography. Can you tell me more about this project and its purpose?

AB: The list of questions is not fixed. It is every time the result of workshops we conducted in Mexico City, Amsterdam or London here ... The questions are not stable, as the photographs themselves. But they are designed to deconstruct. Through these workshops, it is starting to question the photos. So you take a picture and the questions become obvious: the distance from the event was the photographer? Did he have a permit? The subject was he aware of the presence of the photographer? And it gets more complicated: what is the picture quality? Thus we begin to dissect an image as a surgeon body. And we begin to understand more operation.

OC: This is an attempt to decode the images by a series of binary questions. But the good news is that in the end it really is a failure, in the following sense: we represent the decoded by color cubes says very little about what was interesting in the original image. But this led to an interesting conversation about the photographs. And somehow, this has renewed our confidence in photography because there is something in the images that can not be decoded, which can not be reduced to a series of binary questions.

AB: Benjamin was the visual concept of the unconscious. I think he called "" the spark of contingency. " It was his belief in the last photograph. The photographer is and knows what he takes pictures. But ultimately you never know what you really see. This spark of contingency, the visual unconscious is what Oliver was talking about. This is what led to the failure of the project and allows us to continue to move forward with this medium.

RC: For very practical reasons, *War Primer 2* (2011) was published in an edition of only 100 copies sold quite expensive. But then you have edited in a digital version available for free. What for you is the importance of the book form, physical or digital, in the presentation of your work? And what do you think of the current success of the photography book?

OC: First, I do not agree that *War Primer 2* was expensive. We sold 100 pounds [approx. 120 €]. And was sold immediately. In fact, we even sold quite cheap because there was tremendous manual labor to make it. And it definitely was not the object into expensive art object. This would have been completely contrary to what Brecht wanted to do. We did that 100 because of the hard work that it represented.

AB: It's 8500 images that were either hand-glued or screen printed and no professional silkscreen wanted to do. They refused to work on an existing book. Oliver and I had to do it ourselves. It took three or four months of our lives ...

OC: And the e-book is just a solution to make it widely available. I must say that I do not have to watch the digital book, the pleasure I flipping the physical object. It did not approach. I think it is because we do not know yet how this medium work. It is still very new. This technology is still in its infancy. Codes that produce these digital books are incredibly limited. We were very excited to start the possibilities of digital books, but for now, it seems very limited. But we should talk about some books.

RC: Yes it was the meaning of the question...

OC: As we said before starting the interview, the phenomenon of the book is very visible at fairs such as the New York Art Book Fair or Offprint in Paris or London Art Book Fair at the Whitechapel Gallery, successful events. There is a new economy of handmade books. We believe that this phenomenon emerges as the art world has become so expensive and exclusive. And it is so difficult for a young artist or photographer to enter the world of art! The books are cheap. It is an economy where everyone can enter. And that's why in the book fairs, we literally see thousands and thousands of very young artists who take this path.

AB: And they make brilliant work. Truly brilliant. But let's maybe Holy Bible really follows War Primer 2 .

RC: Yes. I was going to come to that.

AB: We became very good friends with the archivist's work Benjamin and Brecht in Berlin. One day, he showed us the personal Bible of Brecht. And it had slipped pictures in his Bible. It remained in a corner of our minds. We thought about from time to time. In addition, we are in contact with Archive of Modern Conflict for many years. Finally we met Adi Ophir, who wrote the test [in postscript Holy Bible]. I really want to emphasize the importance of this test since it is actually the moral backbone of this project. Without this test, Holy Bible could be seen as a provocative act and child as he is, in fact, very thoughtful. We dived into the millions of pictures Archive of Modern Conflict impregnated by his philosophy.

RC: What interested you in the thesis of Adi Ophir?

AB: To put it very simply, almost childlike way to school, I read the Old Testament every day for twelve years. And I think most have a relationship to the book before reading Adi Ophir. He says that the Bible can be seen as a parable of the rise of modern states. God chose his people gave him the law. Men disobeyed him and he punished them severely. And can be replaced by the word of God or state government ... We are all born with this tacit contract that exist that we accept the death penalty, the invasion of Iraq, parking fines and all such laws. But I did not sign a contract emerging! And here we are, living in this strange society. This reading was much excited me because for me, this book [the Bible] came alive. And it also helped me to understand that I was sort of angry against this book.

RC: How did you work: you first chose phrases that are highlighted in Holy Bible or images?

OC: We started by reading the Bible. We read the Old and New Testament, something that very few people do now because it is a real job...

RC: I can imagine...

OC: Some chapters are extremely exciting. Many things happen, the stories are brilliant. Others are incredibly commonplace. Pages and pages on health issues or money or relationships generations to generations and generations ... And I could go on forever. But we continued to read the Bible and select passages that were interesting to us, because they were not biblical but primarily because they echoed in contemporary ett because then they treated one way or another of making images. Throughout the Bible there are references to the images and their production ett it in very different ways and with equally diverse perspectives. The meta-narrative of this book is really the production of images.

So we started reading the book highlighting passages. At the same time, we went to Archive of Modern Conflict. This really is an environment that Borges: a kind of infinite library. Immerse her in there look gives a little dizzy as it seems infinite. We wanted to look at all the archives for this book but every day we spent there, new archive boxes arrived. It was endless. So we began to search for images that deal with a kind of unofficial history of conflicts and themes of photography and disasters.

AB: For me one thing is extraordinary with Archive of Modern Conflict is a very courageous archive material because they accept any other archive or institution refused because they do not match the story one now hears us. For example, they have the largest collection of family albums of Nazi soldiers. We see such a young man kissing his wife with his children, playing with other young men. And it is a story that we are not allowed to see. The book they have the ghetto Wodziej shows a upper middle class, well dressed: Jews in fur coat with pets well fed, when having dinner in the ghetto the day before have has deported. It is a story that no Jewish institution wants to be because it

does not fit into the story we need to hear and see: the victims and executioners, the good and the bad. And then there is a gray area. This is what makes a good archive. And we tried to make the choice of images for Holy Bible .

OC: And then began a very logistical work to match these images we were curious with the texts that interested us. Sometimes the text is an illustrative rather obvious. It describes what the image. Other times, the relationship is much more obtuse. The words may seem to contradict the images or complicated.

AB: The book is a form difficult for us. A book is like a finished article as all our work are "work in progress". For example, Holy Bible could be thousands of incarnations, with connections to various texts and images. War Primer 2 is the collage, photomontage, but it is infinite. These projects communicate instability. When something is offset printing, it puts an end. And there was there a contradiction for us.

Yes, you fix something you'd like to pursue...

AB: Yes. So there is this contradiction that runs through all our work. It deals with the instability and it is presented in a very stable form.

OC: Anyone can take pictures Archive of Modern Conflict, a document like the Bible and the combine. Someone else would have done something very different. Somehow Holy Bible is that our version.

Interview by Rémi Coignet

Thank you to Kevin Jones and Anne-Marie Cauhapé

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