

Broomberg & Chanarin

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Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin
Ashraf Qizilbash for Under the Influence Magazine
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Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin were the 2013 recipients of the highly prestigious Deutsche Borse photography prize for *War Primer 2*, a limited edition book that brings the work of Bertolt Brecht to the foreground of the 21st century. Broomberg and Chanarin are recognised for their photographic oeuvre, which challenges the medium in a raw and constantly developing interpretation. Their examination of photography as documentation exposes the tradition to new truths and visual understanding. Their latest publication is *Scarti*, a collection of overlapping, original images that have become works of art in their own right.

Ashraf Qizilbash: You were embedded in Afghanistan in 2008. It's quite fascinating that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are presented by the mainstream media in such a sanitised way – you see images of soldiers handing out sweets or playing football. But the images that have stayed with us as are the leaked camera phone images, the Wikileaks video, showing the Reuters journalists being killed; the sort of stuff that wasn't meant to be presented. Your work is quite subversive in the way that you document conflict – you chose to expose photographic paper to the sun, not to show images in the way that the other photographers were. How did that project come about?

Oliver Chanarin: It all started with a picture that won an award in the World Press Photo competition in 2007, an extraordinary photograph that was taken during the assassination of Bhutto and it showed the photographer had been very close to the epicentre of the bomb when it detonated. He hadn't had time to compose his photograph, so he'd just lifted up his camera and was about to take a picture when this bomb went off. He was pushed aside and the picture that resulted wasn't a photograph – it was like a kind of blur, just a flash of light. Adam and I were really interested in that image because it didn't actually show you anything; it made us think about how much does a photograph need to show in order to be a piece of evidence?

Adam Broomberg: Yeah, and the other thing to say is that we were invited to judge the World Press Photo awards that year – they award the top photojournalists for their images which are then seen by millions of people around the world. The show travels and it's very prestigious and it then kind of governs the way that images are then made the following year, because the winners define the aesthetic. And another motivation was an analysis of the embedding system, which has a really interesting history.

During the first Gulf War in 1990, they didn't let any photojournalists in, so we all watched it on television but the Americans noticed that during the Falklands War there was space for only three photojournalists on the boat and it was a three week journey. The photojournalists developed a strong emotional bond with the soldiers, which had an impact on the way that they photographed the soldiers; they did a much more heroic, classical depiction rather than the Larry Burroughs, Don McCullin version of conflict. So, what they did is that they formalised this into a kind of contract.

We lied and said we were photojournalists rather than artists. So the form is a work of art in itself: you have to agree not to photograph any dead bodies, any wounded bodies, any evidence of enemy fire – essentially, any evidence of war. They then promise you unprecedented access to the frontline, but they also have unprecedented access to you so it's a deal with the devil. And what the project was, was partly what Ollie's saying – an analysis of what it means to be a witness and the meaning of evidence. Also, we made a film which goes alongside those images; it shows the transportation of this box of paper from our studio all the way to the frontline and back, which becomes a mundane analysis of the embedding process and the boring logistics of war.

They built a city, Camp Bastion is literally the size of a city, so it's all tied in to that and kind of the least important thing are these six-metre long abstract photograms, but they're important in what they provoke and their titles are very important. What we did is we co-opted one of the armoured vehicles and we turned it into a darkroom, and

every time an event happened we would unroll six metres and expose it to the light then put it back in the box. So the whole thing was very performative. And we told the story to all of the soldiers.

OC: What felt really subversive was being in a war zone where you have soldiers fighting, risking their lives on a daily basis, and you're there and you're not documenting it. you're carrying around a cardboard box and exposing bits of paper to the light; it's absurd, it's ludicrous, it was almost like a Dadaist stunt. you know there's this expectation of the journalist to document, to bear witness – that's their job – but obviously it's not as simple as that. We both really believe in witnessing and recording human suffering, but the kind of images that are produced in war zones are sanitised, they don't show any of the signs of war; in fact they show the inverse, they show everything except war.

AQ: So the troops knew what you were doing out there?

AB: they did because we explained it – a big part of the project is doing talks, so we've presented the project many times. there have been people who've been incredibly angry at what they call a waste of money and time putting the soldiers' lives at risk. My personal answer is that I marched in 2003 with a million people against that war and I don't agree with either of those wars and this was an act of protest. I think none of those people should have had their lives put at risk by being there.

AQ: I think it's a fascinating way of showing images – ever since Vietnam, there have been different strictures around photography, so we never saw what was going on in the Falklands... Everything is so sanitised and whitewashed. As you said, you're not allowed to photograph dead bodies or images of war.

OC: But it's not just government, it's a whole system. When you take photographs, that's the beginning of a journey. A photograph is like a piece of currency. Even if it is showing somebody else's suffering, it's an object that goes on a journey, it's distributed through a network and there are many, many layers of censorship, not just governmental. the biggest form of censorship is corporate.

AB: Editors of every newspaper essentially answer to advertisers. they couldn't show an image of a dead body because Gucci wouldn't put an advert next to it. So it's like what Ollie's saying – there's an ecosystem which is moral, political and very much economic which governs what's put out there. on the internet, you can find the alternate version but you have to dig deep, it's not presented in the mainstream media. the mainstream media is very much like public art; if you're asked to make a sculpture for a bank then it has to be something totally uncontroversial and inane, it's public art.

AQ: Prior to this, you went to Israel and worked with a training camp used by the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], which was built to resemble a Palestinian town. And you also showed images of a model town.

AB: That book, *Chicago*, had many chapters. one of them was a camp designed for urban warfare called Chicago, which is a fake Palestinian town. then there was a tourist site called Mini Israel, which is a scale model of somebody's vision of the State of Israel.

OC: What's remarkable about Mini Israel is that it contains every major architectural structure in Israel, or what's considered an important architectural structure, from the Wailing Wall to the Coca Cola factory outside Tel Aviv. But it omits one major structure, which is the security fence that divides the West Bank from Israel.

AB: The other interesting thing is how Arabs are depicted. they are either praying or they're seen as rural shepherds, but none of them are actually citizens of a contemporary, buzzing city like Tel Aviv. they're not depicted as citizens.

OC: But that project is about fiction. It's about the fantasy of Israel. We're both Jewish and we both went to Israel as teenagers and planted trees as every young Jewish boy does. And there was a dream about what Israel was supposed to be that never came to be, and there's a kind of melancholy about that. Both those places, Mini Israel and Chicago, felt to us like projections of this melancholic reality that never came to pass.

AB: We found these targets in Mini Israel used as sniper training and one of them was an Israeli dressed up as their cartoonish idea of a militant Palestinian. the other one was a blaxploitation poster, which is ludicrous. So the enemy in that case, the 'other', has a broad bracket. But essentially for me what that book is about, is how power – in this case, the State of Israel – intelligently uses aesthetic strategy to communicate things. So, a forest communicates the

sublime innocence of nature. Recently, the JNF [Jewish National Fund], who built all the forests, lost a case where it was proved that one of the forests, in fact many of them, were actually planted on the sites of destroyed Arab villages in 1948. If you think about destroying a village and planting a forest that looks like it's been there for a thousand years, well, it's an incredibly clever strategy. But it's also a study about how aesthetic strategies that photographers consider are also thought about by governments.

OC: We had this surreal experience when the IDF took us to show us the security wall. We were standing under this wall that went about 30 metres high and 30 metres down into the ground and into the horizon in both directions. Adam and I asked if we could be taken further down the wall and the soldier said "please will you stop calling it a wall; it's a fence." then you realise that you're in this surreal minefield of linguistics; is it a forest, is it the site of genocide; is it a fence, is it a wall?

That trip to Israel was really critical for us and our practice because on our first trip, when we started that project, we went to meet Arafat in his compound in Ramallah. It was about eight months before he died and we took a portrait of him. on the way back from Israel, at the airport, our camera film was taken from us and scanned. they literally scanned it back and forth about thirty times, intentionally trying to damage the film. they knew we had been to meet Arafat and they were smiling as they sent our box of film back and forth through the machine. When we got back to the UK, we processed the film and there was this fogging on the picture, a big green stripe across his chest. Initially, we were very upset but then it occurred to us that in a way this picture had become a collaboration with the IDF, with, as Adam said, power. they had written on the picture for us and somehow this green stripe was more interesting than the image embedded on the film.

AB: And it also says something else, that images have a long life and their meaning is never fixed, they're very liquid. They are capricious, malleable and have a long biography, they can change all the time and be read and re-read and I think it's important that we recognise that. that's why we often work with text because it helps, not to concretise it but to contextualise and add a layer of meaning or our reading.

AQ: But you've chosen to document conflict zones without displaying the conflict, which is a fascinating strategy. Is there a political message in that?

AB: What does a picture of a man shooting a gun at another man tell you? Besides that it's exciting, what information is in there?

OC: I think it's a really complicated question. We started off as documentarians in quite a naïve way, with a belief in the power of photography and the importance of bearing witness. We worked as documentary photographers, going to the sort of places that documentary photographers go – to psychiatric hospitals, to prisons and refugee camps. these places are extremely photogenic and it started to bother us; we started to reflect on our presence in these places and our relationship with our subjects. We started feeling that what we were doing was very naïve and actually we needed to be not just documenting but reflecting on the act of documenting itself.

AB: Photography is all about power: when you're behind the camera, you're in a position of power. A psychiatric patient or a prisoner doesn't know the political, social, or economic value of that image and we became more and more uncomfortable with that.

AQ: Is that why you had the psychiatric patients in Cuba take their own pictures?

OC: Well, that was a kind of Mickey Mouse attempt to rectify the flow of power. We were genuinely surprised at how those subjects – who are very often highly medicated and extremely naïve about the process of having their photograph taken – reacted to the system of taking their own picture. they were really eloquent in communicating certain things; there's a photograph of one boy who is just screaming at the top of his voice in the picture. When we asked him why, he said that he was smiling because in a photograph one smiles. there is another patient who asked to take two pictures and he put one hand on his head and one hand on his heart and explained that he was trying to communicate his struggle. the picture that we put on the cover of *Ghetto* is a picture of a patient who turns his back to the camera and takes the picture – we thought that was such a poetic and eloquent gesture, so articulate. But I don't think it really solved the problem that Adam referred to, which is this problematic flow of power between us, as the photographers, and the passive subject.

AB: Especially in these institutions, where you've been given authority by those in power, so everyone else thinks you're part of the institution. I think all of our work is very much about power. And you know the history of photography is linked with the history of power; it was developed alongside government – if you look at early French landscape pictures from Palestine, they are all pretty much empty. Some people argue that it's because the exposure time was so long, but others argue that they came back with pictures of empty landscapes that were ripe for settlement, for invasion.

OC: They're a bit like Chicago, this thing that you can project a fantasy on to.

AB: And then all the major developments – Alphonse Bertillon, who developed the mug shot, taking front and side photos – it's all related to policing and controlling. What we're trying to do is to highlight that relationship.

AQ: With *War Primer 2*, you took images and you married them with Brecht's captions and placed them over the old images. You've said that you often place text next to images, what was the process behind the couplings here – how did you select the images to go alongside the captions?

OC: We've said it was almost like putting Brecht's name into Google and seeing what came out, but it was actually much less mechanical than that. Adam and I worked with a team of helpers to build relationships between Brecht's original poems and contemporary images and where his pictures and poems were dealing with the period of WWII, ours were dealing with the period of the 'War on terror': from 9/11 to the death of Bin Laden.

AB: We were also looking at photography, which Brecht was also looking at – there's one image that's an aerial view of the bombing of Liverpool. Just imagine at the time what an aerial photograph meant, it wasn't often you saw that – and our thing was looking at how photography of conflict has changed. So, the lasting images are images of Abu Ghraib rather than the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein, rather than all the things that Bush wanted to make into the iconic images. A lot of the images that we've overlaid meditate on these kinds of strategies; some are made by insurgents, some are made by soldiers with their phones...

OC: Some are made just by the weapons themselves, which is frightening.

AQ: Do you think that the images today have the same need to be decoded the way that Brecht thought they did? His epigrams were to deconstruct the image and the propaganda value; and some of your photographs are photo-ops, like Bush handing out the turkey – do you think those also need to be deconstructed and seen as propaganda?

AB: We were hoping that Brecht's poems were alluding to that decoding. the image you mention is Bush with a turkey superimposed over one of Hitler serving a stew and that's not comparing Bush to Hitler; it's comparing exactly what you're saying – the photo-op and how that is a strategy used by power. We're hoping that the combination of Brecht's original image, our image and the quatrain would work to decode the images.

OC: Brecht's book is called *War Primer* because it was presented as a kind of textbook. So the poems, as you say, are supposedly set up as an explanation of how to read the picture. But what we discovered through working closely with the book was that very often they didn't explain how to read the picture at all but rather complicated it, made it more complex. And I think that was Brecht's message; that photographs are apparently so simple, but in fact you're looking at a sort of hieroglyphics.

AB: And also, a lot of it is funny. It's serious, but some of the poems and images are funny, and I think there's a humour to our work that is often not spoken about. the absurdity of taking a roll of paper to Afghanistan was kind of hilarious – we would laugh on a daily basis at how absurd it was, it was the act of a jester. Power doesn't want to see war as funny but, if you read *Catch-22*, it's total madness.

OC: Was it Sean O'Hagan who called us conceptual pranksters? yeah, we were quite proud of that.

AQ: Moving on to Holy Bible: it could be seen as quite controversial – both for defacing the scriptures and for the images you've used. Some of them are pretty violent, and you've underlined some pretty violent text. It seems like your work has maybe become more comfortable with depicting violence since you've left the conflict zones.

OC: I think there's a different responsibility for images you find to ones that you take. one of the things that came up

after we made Holy Bible and having to field questions like this was that the Bible is extremely violent – it's horrific, worse than anything you've ever seen in the cinema or in the newspapers. But why is it that we're more offended by violent images than violent words? I think that's a really interesting question that we don't have the answer to.

AB: But just to contextualise the Bible project, there's a short essay at the back written by Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir and, to badly paraphrase him, what he says is that the Bible is a kind of parable for the growth of modern governance, for the state. he says that God appears through catastrophe – he metes out this radical punishment and, now that we are confused between God and the state, we all find this kind of silent contract where we just accept all these toxic things: the notion of jail and parking fines and Guantanamo Bay. he's saying (and this was a revelation for me) that perhaps one of the sources of our lack of political resistance is because the Bible is so embedded in us, it's such a part of our being and we've got confused between God and the state, so we accept all these things.

AQ: And now we're always going to war in the name of God and religion.

AB: Or in the name of power – the 'war on drugs', the 'war on terror', it's endless and it's pointless.

OC: But cheer up! We're working on a project now that relates really closely to the theme of power. In Russia, in Moscow, we were working with this camera that's been developed for border control and public security. It's this crazy machine that is designed to take not even a photograph but a life mask of your face, and it does it without your collaboration. So the developers talked about the challenge of designing this new type of camera to take a photograph without the collaboration of the subject, and what's so dark about this thing is that wherever the subject looks – whether it's up or down or wherever – this machine always grabs their face from the front, looking forward.

AB: In one second! And the other thing is that, say there's a mass protest and you're walking down the road with 200,000 people. they've got these cameras all the way down the road and you're obscured by different people, so one camera will capture 10% of you, the next will capture another 10%, by the end of the road they'll have 100% of your face. And it's very cheap, it's very simple; it's all code and it's about to be rolled out throughout the world. you'll end up with a coded image of a life mask, or a death mask, that you can turn in space and get any angle.

OC: And what's so unnerving about these portraits is they're always looking forwards at the camera, but they're actually not looking at anything because they're fictional, essentially: it's a fictional gaze.

AB: It's called non-collaborative portraiture, that's the term for it. We managed to photograph Pussy Riot and the then official opposition leader who's now in jail. our take was to say, let's photograph people whose politics resist power, in a way. But it's pretty frightening.

AQ: So this is what you're working on now?

AB: It's one of the things, yeah!

AQ: And what else?!

AB: We're doing a really lovely book. Our book *Ghetto* was published by trolley... I don't know if you knew Gigi Giannuzzi, but he was a close friend and he died recently. When hannah [Watson, his business partner] was unpacking his stuff, she discovered that when you print on an off-set printer you've got to clean the inks after you've sent it through. So, you print a few things and they keep a pile and then there are the scraps – called 'scarti' – so you get these overlaid prints that are accidental photomontages. Some of them are just brilliant: you'll have the hand of a prisoner in South Africa and a 90-year-old woman in a place called Leisureworld in the US; you'll have a refugee camp in tanzania... all these parallel universes. We'd leave the refugee camp and go to hong Kong to photograph something but then I'd think, those 150,000 people are still there. In fact, they're still there, and it's more than 10 years on. So that's one book we're working on.

We're also working on an opera, actually, because Brecht intended *War Primer* to be an opera. he worked with the composer Hans Eisler and they turned 15 of the quatrains into livrets, and we're working with the Akademie der Kunst, the Brecht archive – they're collaborating with us and a couple of other people to turn this into an actual opera. We haven't confirmed the actual composer but the idea is to take the poems that haven't been turned into

compositions.

AQ: And you'll use the 15 that have already been done?

OC: yeah, we will. But what's so lovely about that *Scarti* book is the kind of chance encounter of these different images against each other. And we haven't spoken about chance, but chance is something that we are very curious about – the work we did in Belfast, called *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground* is about these accidental frames made by the gesture of the archivist as she writes. you have these accidental things coming out. And the reason I wanted to talk about it is that I was just reading an interview with Duchamp yesterday and the interviewer asked him about chance, about why he was interested in chance. Because Duchamp was the first person, before John Cage, to make music based on the rolling of a dice. And he said something really interesting, which is that he was interested in his chance, as opposed to someone else's chance. that chance is a way of expressing something that the rational can't express.

AB: I think even those works in Afghanistan – we didn't know what they would look like, and didn't really particularly care – they were up to chance.

OC: But they were our chance, and if somebody else had made them, they would have come out somehow differently.

AB: And in a funny way all of our work is a kind of an exquisite corpse, not to get too surrealist, but we're continually bouncing between each other so we reply to one another's input. And also, our work is kind of anonymous, because neither of us owns it, so that's kind of important as well. It's not the heroic artist.

AQ: Do you guys come up with ideas for projects together?

AB: there'll be a spark and we'll work off it, but they're all collaborations. Another project we're working on is the film *Catch-22*. I think, at the time of filming, it was the 16th biggest air force in the world – they gathered so many B25 bombers. And it was done in Mexico, to look like Italy. one of the aeroplanes they blew up on film and it's buried there. So we're going to go there and dig it up. And, at the same time, we've discovered in the Paramount archives that there's a huge chest that has been unopened since it was shot of all the cutaways made for the film. So, it's a parallel archaeological dig – one is filmic and one is the object. So those are a few things we're working on.