


Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin: Bible mashers

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By Lucy Davies

There are 788,258 words in the [King James Bible](#). How many people can claim to have read every one of them in a single attempt? Two years ago, over a 12-month period, the artists [Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin](#) did just that.

“Bits of it are incredibly gripping, particularly towards the end,” says Chanarin, when we meet at their London studio. “Other parts are incredibly banal. I’d never read it before, but I felt familiar with it. The Bible is a piece of public property; everybody feels ownership over it.”

The experience fed into Broomberg and Chanarin’s latest project, *Holy Bible*, which was published in book form last year and goes on show as a series of collages at the Mostyn gallery in Wales this week. The book is a perfect replica of the Bible you probably have on your shelf at home, but with images pasted over parts of the text, and certain sentences underlined.

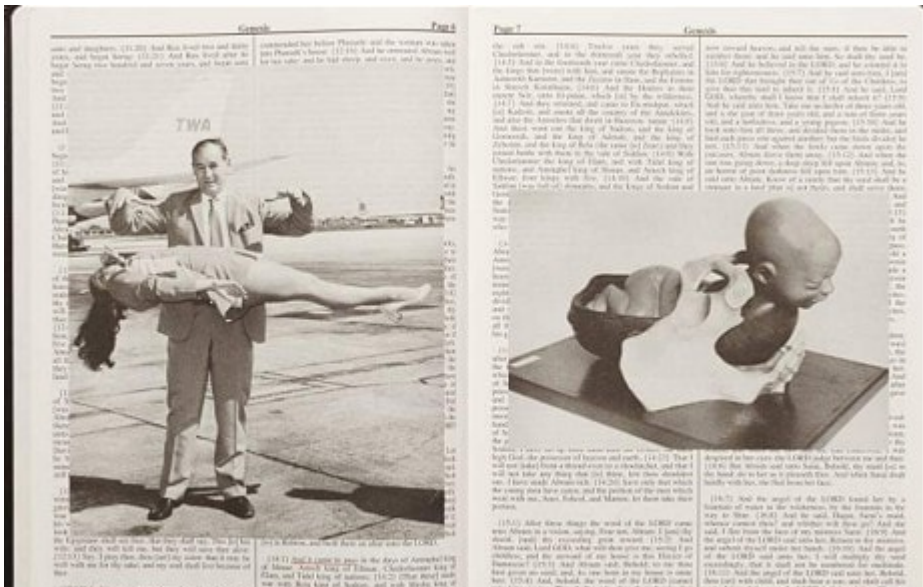
The initial inspiration for *Holy Bible* came from annotations they found in Bertolt Brecht’s bible while foraging in the playwright’s archive in Berlin. He had used it as a sort of scrapbook, pasting an image of a racing car on the cover, and other pictures throughout.

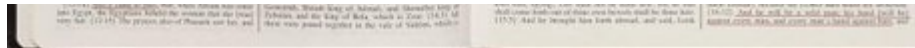
“It struck us that the Bible fits so well with photography,” says Chanarin. “Since its beginning the camera has had a biblical reach; it has tried to describe and witness everything. But there was also something extremely juvenile about just sticking pictures in the text. It could be seen as a ‘f--- you’ to Christianity. We were aware of that and worried about that. We needed something to shape what we were doing and give it substance.”

They found what they were looking for in a text by Israeli scholar Adi Ophir. *Divine Violence*, from which the show at Mostyn takes its name, reinterprets the Old Testament as a parable for the emergence of modern government. “He uses it to talk about the Bush administration, and shows how law is linked to catastrophe. The minute we read it, everything fell into place.”

Both Broomberg and Chanarin are Jewish. Broomberg went to a Zionist day school, where the Old Testament “was pushed on us as a moral guide”, he tells me. “One of the teachers suggested we use it as a travel guide for Israel. I thought of it as a horrific piece of fiction.”

“I’d never a relationship with it as a sacred object,” says Chanarin. “It was just something you find in a motel room. It was remarkable to me that such an ancient text was so prescient and useful as a way of talking about our contemporary world.”





In the beginning: A spread from Genesis in 'Holy Bible'

Broomberg and Chanarin met aged 20 in Wuppertal, a tiny missionary town in **South Africa's** desert Cape. Although they both grew up there, they've lived in London for a long time now, Broomberg in Hackney, Chanarin above their Spitalfields studio, in a tall, dignified building built for Huguenot silk-weavers in the early 1700s.

Their basement workspace looks out onto a leafy courtyard. Today the doors are flung open to dispel the scent of printing ink lacing the air after a poster-making session. A line from **Joseph Heller's** novel Catch-22 – “Be furious, you're going to die” – is spelt out in wet, red letters silk-screened on to pages from an old newspaper and hung out to dry.

Although the pair started out taking photographs for magazines and newspapers, uneasiness soon pushed their work on to gallery walls. “We began to feel uncomfortable about how naive our subjects were about the power of an image,” says Broomberg. “A photograph is a piece of currency that has an afterlife. We wanted to make work that critiqued that.”

IN PICTURES: BROOMBERG & CHANARIN WIN DEUTSCHE BÖRSE PRIZE

Now both aged 42, they have sat facing each other in this studio – computer screens back-to-back like easels in a playschool – for 17 years, working together with an easy, almost marital familiarity. They have a studio assistant, two interns, and a black poodle named after the artist Otto Dix. One wall has been turned into a vast pinboard where ideas are mapped out in a complicated arrangement of red threads. It looks like the situation room from a Hollywood police procedural.

Last year they won the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize – what's the secret to their working partnership? “We bring very different sensibilities,” says Broomberg. “One acts as a sounding board to the other. Our work becomes almost anonymous because neither of us are really the author, and that gives us great freedom. The artist is usually seen as an individual genius. That a work might be the result of a discussion, rather than somebody's subconscious, disturbs people. Especially with photography, because photographers are meant to have a perfect sense of timing, and sometimes we don't even know which of us took the picture.”



Chapter and Verse: A spread from Ezekiel in 'Holy Bible'

The pair began the Holy Bible project by underlining sentences in the text that referred to image-making. They then trawled for corresponding pictures in the **Archive of Modern Conflict**, a repository in west London that began as a photographic archive of war and violence, but whose holdings have broadened to include collections as eccentric as First World War dentistry and illusionists' sleights of hand.

“It made me nauseous to be surrounded by so many graphic images,” admits Chanarin. “But also curious. The Bible is so violent, but there’s something acceptable about it. We’re more at ease with violent words than violent pictures.”

It took them six months to find what they needed. They laid out the Bible, chapter and verse, and began to collage. “That was when we noticed that the phrase ‘And it came to pass’ runs right through,” says Chanarin. “We paired that sentence with images of magic tricks. In theological terms, you might call them miracles.”

Has so much time spent with the Bible left its mark on them? “It’s been profound,” says Chanarin. “When we started out we were scared of ambiguity. A photograph had to reflect something very clearly. But over the years we’ve come to embrace it. It’s like a thread that keeps on unravelling even as we ravel.”

'Broomberg & Chanarin: Divine Violence' is at Mostyn, Llandudno, Wales, from July 19; mostyn.org

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