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The Dodo Effect

Broomberg & Chanarin take fiction as the start point for their investigation into the representation and mythology of war. Tom Seymour meets them

Simon Bainbridge — 9 October 2014



The last dodo egg, at the East London Museum in South Africa's Eastern Cape, photographed by Jac de Villiers, commissioned by Broomberg & Chanarin

In June 2008, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin swapped their east London studio for Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Embedded with the British Army, they arrived during the deadliest month of the entire war – the day after they arrived, a fixer for the BBC was dragged from his car and executed, then nine Afghan soldiers were killed in a suicide attack. The following day, three British soldiers were killed on patrol. The celebrated conceptual photographers left their cameras at home, however, instead ‘documenting’ each event by rolling out 50m-long pieces of photographic paper at 7m intervals and exposing them to the intense Afghan sun. “The results deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering,” the pair claimed, exhibiting the end result with the title *The Day Nobody Died*.

Broomberg and Chanarin, both 43 and from South Africa, have become increasingly interested in the depiction of war – last year they won the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for War Primer 2, a repurposing of Bertolt Brecht’s teachings for the 9/11 generation, and won the ICP Infinity Award for Holy Bible, their take on the world’s best-selling book, both added to with images mined from the Archive of Modern Conflict. Yet they seem intent on defining themselves against mainstream war photography, and welcomed the inevitable flak they copped for *The Day Nobody Died*. “People asked, ‘Is this anti-photojournalism?’” Chanarin says. “And of course the answer is no. *The Day Nobody Died* was anti-empathy, because that is a useless response to a photograph of somebody else’s suffering.” “Photography, and especially war photography, is trapped by this notion of the document, of endless debates about truth and authenticity,” says Broomberg. “Broadly speaking, that’s actually just a bullshit notion. The kind of distinctions we make about photography are so banal. We’re still caught up in laying claim to what is and isn’t real, but that argument was over 60 years ago. What constitutes evidence is the only real question, the only thing that matters.”

Chanarin picks up on the point, referring to a recent work exhibited by Rabih Mroué entitled *The Pixelated Revolution*. The video, which was filmed by a civilian, shows a Syrian sniper operating from a rooftop. The sniper sees the man with the camera and takes aim, and the videographer documents his own death. “That totally destroyed me,” Chanarin says. “You know, for a very short period in the history of photojournalism, a utopic notion existed of the objective witness, but life is so much more messy than that. Think of Robert Capa’s *Death of a Republican Soldier*; he didn’t even look through the camera when he took the picture – he held it up above his head and clicked randomly. The single most iconic photojournalistic image was in fact authored by an act of chance.”

I meet the duo in their Brick Lane studio in early July, a picturesque clutter of books, ornaments, prints and old cameras punctuated by laptops and other mod cons. I’m here to talk about their latest war-based project, *Dodo*, and the day after we spoke they flew to Mexico City to launch it at Fundación Jumex gallery. Combining “archival research, archeological excavation and montage”, *Dodo* is framed by the 1970 film adaptation of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, the satirical novel about a B-52 pilot trying his best not to get involved in the Allied invasion of Italy in 1943. “Fiction is allowed its space to explore the psyche of war in the way photography isn’t,” Broomberg explains. “Certain works of fiction – *Catch-22*, Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, WG Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*, Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* – act as my proxy for conflict much more than any photograph ever has. “That’s what I turn to if I want an account of war and suffering. I remember Primo Levi writing about a son tending to his sick father in Auschwitz; while he cares for him he steals a bit of bread from under his father’s pillow. That image is more powerful to me than anything a camera’s ever created.”

Later Chanarin offers more of a defence of the pair’s chosen medium. “Works of literature such as *Catch-22* offer a psychic evidence of war,” he says. “But that doesn’t rob photography of its ability to give us evidence, and it should strive to do that. The images coming out of Gaza right now tell us something very real and undeniable – that Israel is committing human rights violations. One of the great tragedies of the Holocaust is that few images were produced inside the camps.” At the time, Hollywood’s *Catch-22* was the most expensive movie ever produced – it was shot over six months on San Carlos, an untouched desert island off Mexico. “They built a full-size airstrip; they assembled 18 original B52 bombers to use in the film,” says Broomberg. “They built the sixth biggest airforce in the world just to make a movie.” One of the majestic bombers was buried on set after crashing 435 during filming – you can see it go down in the background as Martin Balsam and Jon Voight discuss the vagaries of selling eggs.

Broomberg and Chanarin decided to travel to San Carlos to exhume the so-called Mexican plane, after gaining access to 11 hours of never-before-seen footage from the film – scenes from the gargantuan shoot left on the cutting-room floor and then archived by Paramount Pictures. They found only fragments – aluminium shards, rusty nails, rabbit droppings. “We always begin with a fantasy, a cartoon of how things are going to turn out,” Chanarin says. “We imagined finding an aeroplane buried in the desert in Mexico. But that would have been depressing. Luckily the world is more interesting than the content of our heads.” San Carlos was a sleepy, quiet place until the crew arrived in May 1968 – back then the coastline off the Sea of Cortez resembled Pianosa, the Tuscan island where Heller set *Catch-22*, which was why it was chosen as a location. But after the crew wrapped up and returned to Los Angeles, it left behind a road, control towers, derelict villas and a fully operational runway. “The film created a town,” Broomberg says. As Mexico became one of the most dangerous countries in the world, the runway fell into the hands of a drugs cartel, becoming a literal launchpad for supplying narcotics into California; it was then destroyed by the Mexican government and now lies derelict. “There are all these levels of history I find interesting,” Broomberg says. “San Carlos, as a whole, is now this hideous victim of American colonisation. It’s been totally ruined by tourism and the drugs trade.”

The title, the pair write in the exhibition’s notes, references the reconstruction of something lost to time. “The plane’s disappearance recalls that of the dodo, the first species to be made extinct as a result of human activity,” they write. “Four centuries after its last sighting, not a single intact skeleton or trustworthy image remains. Only one egg survives.”

Broomberg and Chanarin also use *Dodo* to explore the way war – in this case World War II – is archived, fictionalised and remembered through popular culture, and also forgotten and misplaced. They call this process the dodo effect, Chanarin commenting that “real life informs our fictional rendering of conflict”. In the vast gallery space offered at Jumex, the pair have gathered and collected fragments and shards of the fated B-52 – the famous ‘Mexican plane’. A propeller (from a separate bomber) standing at four metres high, powers air and throbbing sound through the gallery. Frames from the film, still-life photographs of the last dodo egg taken by the South African photographer Jac de Villiers and never-before-seen off-cuts from the film combine to create an installation that explores how works of art, in this case an adaptation of a book about war, can also become something else, shying away from the artist’s original intention to gain a new and unexpected meaning. “Something can’t help become a document of something else, somehow,” Broomberg says.

The pair refer to *Dodo* as a nature documentary, Chanarin describing it as “a portrayal of the coastline and wildlife of San Carlos as it stood on the brink between isolation and urban development”. “We started with a representation of war, and we created a documentary of a place that’s had to endure a very different sort of war,” Broomberg says. “That’s what we find interesting.”

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