

NO STATISTICS

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If one were to search for models for contemporary practice which consisted of the perhaps unlikely combination of postmodern methodology, documentary reportage and an enduring reference to the archival, then the work of Broomberg and Chanarin would present itself as a particularly apt example. Broomberg and Chanarin continuously confront histories, ethnicities, nationalities and locations, the representations of which are consistently filtered through a visual thought process which places their work within a personal space which is idiosyncratic, inventive and iconoclastic. Their collaborative working produces end products which are very much encompassed within the terms of artistic partnership – a free-ranging thought process contained within very particular boundaries of carefully tempered and organized working practices.

The fact that Broomberg and Chanarin's partnership emerged during their time as principal photographers at Colors magazine is important when considering the later trajectory of their work. Colors, founder-edited by the art-director Tibor Kalman in 1990, represented a new direction in magazine visuals and editorial. Using an inventive mix of photo reportage, portraiture and kitsch, it combined social awareness and concern with the smooth professionalism of the glossy magazine. Colors reinterpreted humanism and gave it a postmodernist knowingness, which both challenged and reinforced the traditional messages of photography.

In the 2003 publication *Ghetto*, Broomberg and Chanarin assembled a collection of the self-set assignments which they made while creative directors of Colors. During their time at the magazine, Broomberg and Chanarin radically altered its focus, abandoning, to a large extent, what they saw as a somewhat 'naïve and idealistic' view of society and the use of photography in its portrayal.¹ In *Ghetto*, Broomberg and Chanarin also began to interweave image and text, a process which still underpins their work. For them this process was a radical one, positioning the photographer as a textual as well as a visual author.² Continuously interested in the power of early photography, Broomberg and Chanarin saw to it that *Ghetto* 'knowingly drew on nineteenth-century techniques but attempted to turn these conventions on its head'.³

When Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg look at both history and current events, they challenge and reinforce the classic idea of photography as documentarist of the social condition. Importantly, their practice crosses a number of significant boundaries and the work which emerges is a combination of art practice, archival experiments and a very singular form of photojournalism.

So, when looking at the ways in which Broomberg and Chanarin document

and explore 'histories', an awareness of their pluralities and multiplicities must always be at the forefront. In their recent publication *Fig.* Broomberg and Chanarin have constructed an exceptionally complex document, which in many ways is a compendium, even a dictionary of their many-layered practice. *Fig.* is about history, but is also a history in its own right, as the two collaborators confront the many ways that they, over the last two decades, have confronted the world and sought for ways in which to portray it. *Fig.* is, in many ways, a deeply melancholic document, which looks at the ways in which the human condition is dominated by blind faith, by the accidental, by fragments of meaning. Broomberg and Chanarin have combined their exploration of the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton, the *Ex-Voto* images discovered in Italian churches with depictions of counterfeit pain (as expressed by disaster-exercise volunteers in London) and the real trauma of war and civil unrest. They are fascinated by the fables that history constructs, from the erotic magazine cut-outs discovered in a museum cupboard to the triumphalist self-portraits made by a game hunter in Africa. Draped with a multitude of beautiful skins, kneeling by the side of a slain wild animal, the ascendancy of man over nature seems preposterous. Searching for beauty in the dead, in foreshortened histories.

The curator of the Booth Museum, with his horde of glamour photos, stands in bizarre opposition to the taxidermy which the museum uses to demonstrate the workings of the natural world. History, as we know, is full of ironies, and Broomberg and Chanarin's work is repeatedly an exercise in visualizing and collecting them.

Take, for example, the narrative of Stanley Aluma, the only tuner able to undertake the tuning of the grand piano at the Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali in Rwanda. Broomberg and Chanarin illustrate him via a street studio portrait photograph, as he poses, leather case in hand, against a fantastical painted landscape. We know that the landscape is fantastical because we are acquainted with the vernacular of the street studios (and assume that they are not 'real') – we surmise that the attache? case contains tuning instruments because Broomberg and Chanarin have told us of Mr Aluma's occupation. The photograph, with its accompanying narrative, is then to be believed.

But turn to the next page, and a description of the grand piano is merged with statistics of genocide dead and refugee numbers in Rwanda. Opposite this information is a photograph of an animal skeleton in a natural history museum in Chad, which is reminiscent of a piano, but which is also symbolic of death, its receptacle, the museum, and a national and regional heritage. Pianos in the midst of genocide, skeletons in the museum, vernacular portraits which could be of anyone. Broomberg and Chanarin urge us both to believe and to be sceptical; like the commissioners of the *Ex Voto* portraits in Italy, they are aware of the difficulties of representing pain and the multifaceted surface of human experience. Wandering through *Fig.*, one is conscious of being in a maze of information and, truths and half-truths, secrets and lies.

The 1999 Broomberg and Chanarin work *Trust* (published in 2000) seems, at first sight, to exist outside the narrativisation and historicism of Broomberg and Chanarin's later, and more well-known series. Consisting of a lengthy series of portraits of British men, women and children completely engaged in various activities, it relied not on eclectic methodology of collecting and juxtaposing, but rather on the momentum created by a single subject and the intensity of a gaze – both the photographers' and the subjects'. Viewed now, in the light of *Fig.* and other later projects, it can be seen as the beginning of an ongoing questioning, not so much, as some commentators have rather easily suggested, of photography itself, but rather of the process of narrative.

Trust contains no narrative other than the one which we impose upon it through looking. We can imagine what the subjects are seeing, making these conclusions through studies of the faces that we see. But we have no facts. Broomberg and Chanarin continuously experiment with the idea of the unfolding of narrative and histories, no more so than in their most recent work, *The Day that Nobody Died*, which follows their 2006 series *Chicago*. Prefacing the publication *Chicago* is the statement 'Everything that happened, happened here first, in rehearsal'. This beginning is significant, announcing Broomberg and Chanarin's constant attention to the process of history. *Chicago* is an artificial but highly realistic Arab town built in the middle of the Negev desert by the Israeli Defense Force for urban combat training. It is a ghost town whose history directly mirrors the story of the Palestinian conflict. To create this alternative universe, Palestinian architecture has been carefully scrutinized. Roads and alleyways have been constructed to mimic the layout of towns like Ramallah and Nablus. In one corner, the ground has been covered with sand, a reference to unpaved refugee camps like Jenin. Graffiti has been applied to the walls with obscure declarations in Arabic: 'I love you Ruby' and 'Red ash, hot as blood'. 'Burned-out vehicles line the streets.'⁴ As Broomberg and Chanarin remark: 'Walking through *Chicago* is like visiting a de-commissioned film set, the props and furnishings stripped away to reveal its most basic components – the walls, the apertures for doors and windows, the streets. And it is here, in this parallel world, that the occupation of the Palestinian territories is played out by generations of Israeli soldiers, over and over again.' The series *Chicago*, which forms the first section of the book, is an austere and almost super-real set of photographs which centres on architectural details – interiors and exteriors – plus studies of details – pieces of graffiti and the eerie, child-like constructions, mysterious and random. In photographing this macabre stage set, Broomberg and Chanarin bring much of the methodology of earlier works to this series. Their pictures are clear and precise, sometimes almost luscious. But their subject matter is sharply political, revelatory of military matters, control and surveillance. These humble dwellings are unpeopled, unfurnished, holes are made in their walls without fear of the terror of a civilian population. As Broomberg and Chanarin remark, this is a 'rehearsal' but, needless to say, one in which the majority of the cast are absent. If *Chicago* is an exploration of a rehearsal, of a scene set, then their most recent work, *The Day Nobody Died* is a performance, a collaborative improvisation. Interviewed for a recent issue of

HotShoe Magazine, Adam Broomberg comments:

I think that now is the most interesting time for documentary photography. Rather than feeling like it's in its demise, now is a time of real re-birth, in that you need to be more intelligent and more informed. It's actually about thinking. The art/documentary crossover has added an important element into the field as well, in that it's not just about putting pictures on the wall anymore. For centuries the art world has been thinking about aesthetic rules, and the rules of engagement and so on. So it has also become about, 'How do we apply these rules to documentary?' There's a lot more studying to be done on the part of the photographer, rather than just looking at the history of documentary photography. And that's a real challenge. 5

Remarkably, Broomberg and Chanarin have used photojournalism not as an end in itself, but as a channel through which to construct a sophisticated artwork, which speaks of photojournalism, but which has a very different, and singular, outcome. In the making of *The Day Nobody Died*, Broomberg and Chanarin abandoned their cameras except for tools of documentation for the work that they made.

In June 2008, they travelled to Afghanistan to be embedded with British Army units on the front line in Helmand Province. This lengthy quote from the summary issued for their forthcoming exhibition expresses both the methodology and thinking which underpins this latest work:

In place of their cameras they took a roll of photographic paper 50 metres long and 76.2 cm wide contained in a simple, lightproof cardboard box. They arrived during the deadliest month of the war. On the first day of their visit a BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed and nine Afghan soldiers were killed in a suicide attack. The following day, three British soldiers died, pushing the number of British combat fatalities to 100. Casualties continued until the fifth day when nobody died. In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit to the troops by the Duke of York and a press conference, all events a photographer would record, Broomberg and Chanarin instead unrolled a seven-meter section of the paper and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds. The results – strange abstract passages and patterns of black, white and variegated hues – all modulated by the heat and the light – deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering. Instead the viewer is, by default, invited to question their relationship with images of violence and the true nature of the relations between culture, politics and morality. Working in tandem with this deliberate evacuation of content, are the circumstances of the works' production, which amount to an absurd performance in which the British Army were, unsuspectingly, playing the lead role, co-opted by the artists into transporting the box of photographic paper from London to Helmand, from one military base to another, on Hercules and Chinooks, on buses, tanks and jeeps. In this performance, captured in a series of stills, the box becomes an absurd, subversive object; its non-functionality sitting in quietly amused contrast to the functionality of the system that for a time served as its host. Like a barium test, the journey of the box became, when viewed from the right perspective, an analytical process, revealing the dynamics of the machine in its quotidian details, from the logistics of war to the

collusion between the media and the military. 6 In *The Day Nobody Died* Broomberg and Chanarin have become strange performers within the theatre of war, eccentric and idiosyncratic historians who document real events through the prism of light and abstraction. The photographs which they made, light exposed on a giant sheet of film, are anti-documents, accidents, uncontrollable. For them, the photographer as historian, or even as witness, is a notion to be challenged. The evidence which photography provides, they insist, is not irrefutable. Of the efficacy of the 'soldier photojournalist' embedded with and almost indistinguishable from the troops they photograph, they are sceptical. What they do most clearly believe is that the photographer still has a role to play in the chronicling of society and its conflicts. In *Trust*, they watched people watching, while in *Ghetto* they are in transition as photographers, beginning to hone a methodology which they would later make radical experiments with. In *Fig.* they observed the assemblage of objects, snippets from the real world. Chicago was a tour de force of observation, the contemporary documentarist's perfect location, unreal, yet all too realistic. *The Day Nobody Died* investigates the absurdity of the non-event, one day in wartime when there were no casualties. For, without casualties, there would be no news, no photojournalism, and no history as we would recognize it. Their roll of photographic paper, carried for them by the troops, much as the cumbersome equipment of nineteenth-century photographers would be transported across mountains, deserts and war zones, is in itself an absurdity, a reaction to the ethical stance of photojournalism, complicit in the marketplace of the global media industry. History, as Broomberg and Chanarin observe, is a fuzzy, blurred concept, where facts become fables, and myth is rampant.

1 Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg, Letter, October 2008. 2 Ibid. 3 Ibid. 4 Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg, *Chicago* (London: Steidl/Mack, 2007), preface. 5 Aaron Schuman, "'Fig.'" - A Conversation with Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg', *HotShoe Magazine*, No. 150 (October/November 2007). 6 Press Release, Paradise Row Gallery, London, 2008.