

Double trouble

Artists or photographers? Who knows... At the origin of the London duo Broomberg and Chanarin there is a photo book with a pink cover and a title as beautiful as it is enigmatic: "People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground", and these war images... As soon as I saw this book I knew it would become a part of my library's stock of essentials. I knew it would sit alongside its brothers in arms: Larry Towell's "The World From My Front Porch", and Erik Kessels "In almost every picture 4", next to "Fait" by Sophie Ristelhueber, and right next to "U-ni-ty" by German photographer Michael Schmidt... The Archive of Modern Conflict's latest addition, "Amore e Piombo", a book of anxious beauty, would also be joining in. "People in Trouble Laughing" is one of those books that haunts you and doesn't let go. While you flip through it, the feeling remains the same, the impression of discovering it for the first time, of seeing an abstraction and clinging to it. Beyond its assertive political resonance, within the archival images of the Northern Ireland Troubles, something



invisibly arises from the target like medallions throughout the pages.

Images often compare to ghosts, people say... Because they haunt and frighten us. Because they survive everything, including memory, as migrants free to cross the frontiers of time. They are the surviving images philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman adopted as his hobby horse. Akin to anthropologists, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin trail their traces across the contemporary conflicts of past and present times, through the invisible historical scars, in order to denounce the world's downward spiral, not with an appetite for chaos, but to interrogate both our psychological and ethical relation to images.

Magali Genuite *How did you first get into photography?*

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin Adam first tried to be a bar mitzvah photographer, but failed. I don't believe he was ever hired. My father built a darkroom in my bedroom when

I was growing up and exposed me to lethal photographic chemicals while I was sleeping. So it goes... as Kurt Vonnegut liked to say.

Maga How did your duet begin?

Adam & Oliver A duet is a nice word for it. I wish it was that choreographed. But perhaps it's more like two bullets colliding in mid-air. In fact we recently met a collector in Boonsboro, near Washington DC, who has been gathering rare examples of bullets that have collided in mid-air. It's extremely improbable, but sometimes happens.

Maga Who or what are your inspirations? A photographer, a book or something else?

Adam & Oliver Early on we were inspired by the portrait photography of August Sander. The deadpan style. But his impulse to catalogue society into archetypes bothered us both, and recollected the colonial perspective that the history of photography is so caught up in. We both grew up in South Africa; Europe was far away and alluring. We felt like Nudniks. The sense that there was a flow of power in one direction, from the centre radiating out to the colonies, was something palpable to us, even if it was part of a distant history. A book called "The Soul of the White Ant" by Eugene Marais is important to us both. It's written by a South African botanist, journalist and morphine addict. He discovered that ants live in complex societies, but his research was plagiarised by a Dutch botanist and he died in obscurity. The something else is a film, "The Passenger", by Michelangelo Antonioni. Strangely, and this is a complete coincidence, there is a copy of Eugene Marais' book on the table in the hotel room where the final scene of the film takes place!



Maga Why did you use found photographs, images of images, in your work?

Adam & Oliver Photographers tend to have an unhealthy sense of ownership of their own images. We've never differentiated between a photograph

we've taken and ones that we've found. They are there to be borrowed and stolen. Cut up and chewed up. Instagram understands that. Facebook understands that.

Maga A political dimension is omnipresent in your work. Should photography or art necessarily be political, and why? What pushes you in that direction?

Adam & Oliver Even the medium itself is political. You cannot pick up a camera and not make a political statement about race, about natural resources, about power. Years ago we photographed the PLO leader of Palestine, Yasser Arafat, and when the Israeli Defence force got hold of our film they x-rayed it 30 times to try and destroy it. They also understood that the medium of photography poses a threat to power.



ROOM 2924 – ADAM BROOMBERG & OLIVER CHANARIN

Photography by JACK DAVISON,
interview by MAGALI GENUITE.

Maga Erik Kessels (author of a work celebrating the found photos taken by amateurs) says, "I am interested in images that signal an obsession." How about you? What is your driving force?

Adam & Oliver We are obsessed with Erik Kessels !

Maga In the Holy Bible, you use images from The Archive of Modern Conflict to comment on visual representations of armed hostilities. What was the project's process?

Adam & Oliver It's complicated. We were working with the philosopher Adi Ophir, who spent his career studying the Bible. His thesis is that God only appears through violence or through miracles; two sides of the same coin. So the Bible exists as a parable for the modern state. That was our guiding tenant. We began looking for words and images that reflect the way the state stands about punishment, and how we all remain obedient to it.

Maga Could you talk about your latest work, *Dodo*? What is at stake in that project? Was the discovery of a film at its origin?

Adam & Oliver We discovered that one of the many B25 bombers used in the film "Catch-22" was buried on set in Mexico during filming. We went with Mexico's best archaeologists to dig up the plane but also thought of filmic archaeology. They shot the film for six months and we wondered what happened to all the footage that never made it into the final edit. Turns out Paramount found a chest hidden in the bowels of the archive with 11 hours of footage in it that had never been seen before. We chose just the nature footage... effectively turning a fiction film about WWII set in Italy in 1944 into a nature documentary set in Mexico in 1969. Both are stories of destruction.

Maga You just participated in the Conflict, Time, Photography exhibition at Tate Modern, an exhibition reflecting on the traces left by conflicts across time. How did you contribute to the show?

Adam & Oliver With two projects: "The Day Nobody Died", which was made on the frontline in Helmand Province, Afghanistan during the war in 2008. And another project, "People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground." Both in their own way rely on accidents. In Afghanistan we didn't take cameras, just a 50-meter roll of photographic paper that we exposed

in strips to the sun for 20 seconds. In Belfast we exposed parts of images obscured by the marks of archivists or other visitors to the institution. None of the images were composed by us.

Maga Could it be said that your work deals with issues of "contemporary conflict", while your books deal with war issues? Do they relate a relatively pessimistic reflection on the state of the world?

Adam & Oliver No, quite the opposite. Conflict zones are like petri dishes... a perfect place to watch culture, politics and economy at work. We're not that interested in war, but it provides an amazing opportunity to observe humanity in its funniest and darkest forms.

Maga You pay particular attention to your photography books. They are real "art objects." Will the books replace the exhibitions or are they complementary?

Adam & Oliver They're complementary, two absolutely distinct forms.

Maga Is something else at work in the book? As in Scarti, for example, it's a book about books...

Adam & Oliver Isn't every book..?

Maga What photographer has been fundamental for you, and why?

Adam & Oliver Lee Miller, for taking a bath in Hitler's tub.

Maga What projects are you currently working on?

Adam & Oliver One at the Freud museum. We have the world's best forensic scientist analysing Freud's couch for all the traces of DNA she can find.

Maga The theme of this magazine's next issue is "hotel." Could you give me an anecdote, a memory or even your idea of what this particular space represents? What thoughts or images does it inspire you?

Adam & Oliver Sharing a hotel room in Venice with Grace Jones around 15 years ago is one memory we won't forget.

Reading suggestion : Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Dodo*, RM/ Fundacion Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, 2014.



