FEATURE

Image, Author, Failure, Chance: A Conversation with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

By Rachel Somerstein

An often-cited origin story pervading Western culture goes something like this: Abraham’s father, Terah, runs a shop that sells idols. While his father is away, Abraham, persuaded of the falsehood of idol worship, smashes all but the largest idol, then places the club in the idol’s hands. Terah returns and, seeing the broken statues, asks, “What happened?”; Abraham responds, “Isn’t it clear? Your idol destroyed all the others.” To which Terah replies, “It was you who broke the idols; my idol couldn’t have done this.” Says Abraham: “So you admit it; your idols can do nothing.”

If this midrash, or commentary, is any indication, it’s how monotheism got its iconoclastic start: on the one hand, images aren’t to be trusted; at the same time, they are deeply powerful, and can be used for any number of conflicting agendas; therefore they must be controlled, managed, and when necessary, destroyed. In the millennia since, the fear of and desire to control images has only grown, with governments, the media, militaries, police, and other social institutions fighting to make, hide, and archive certain images, while revealing and circulating others. Animating the struggle, images themselves prove consistently difficult to corral, given their capacity to pick up new and even contradictory meanings, as well as the possibility—thanks to the advent of photography, the internet, and other digital tools—of their (seemingly) limitless repetition and circulation.

Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg, artists who met working as photographers and creative directors at Colors magazine, have spent more than two decades investigating the complex relationship between images and power. Through work that spans photojournalism, curatorial projects, and archives, Broomberg and Chanarin examine images’ roles within systems of trauma, surveillance, and authority, and the degree to which representation itself is implicated within those circuits. Their earlier projects did so through “straight” photojournalism: for Ghetto (2003), the two took photographs in a dozen “modern ghettos,” from Tanzanian refugee camps to a maximum-security prison in Pollsmoor, South Africa; for Trust (2000), they shot portraits of people’s unguarded, unposed faces. These books evince the power of representation as well as the authority of the person making the image.

But in more recent work, the two explain, the individual image is not as important as “revealing the fact behind the camera—that the material, or the technology, which is assumed to be neutral, is anything but neutral.” To that end, over the course of the two weeks they were embedded with the British Army in Afghanistan, the two unrolled and exposed six-meter sections of photo-sensitive paper, resulting in abstract pictures “depicting” the war (The Day Nobody Died, 2008). For another project, To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse In Low Light, (2013), they loaded their cameras with long-expired Kodak film that had been produced to photograph subjects with light, not dark, skin, so as to explore the racist qualities inherent to film. And for their most recent project, Shitk Fleisch Mit Tzeni Eigen (2014), which Chanarin discusses here, they used a new facial recognition camera that creates full-faced portraits even without the subject’s participation.

Another component of Chanarin and Broomberg’s work examines how power operates through institutional archives. As an example, they mined the Belfast Exposed archive for People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground (2011), which includes photographs taken in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. They collected images that were cut up, defaced, written on, and otherwise marked by archivists and the subjects of the photographs themselves. The images bear, and bare, the traces of their uses, making plain attempts to obliterate or highlight certain people or moments—an economy of the image otherwise invisible to most viewers. Similarly, for War Primer 2, which earned them the 2013 Deutsche Borse Photography Prize, they collected images from the internet documenting the so-called War on Terror, and collaged them onto Bertolt Brecht’s War Primer (1955). Most recently they received a 2014 ICP Infinity award for Holy Bible, for which they collaged images selected from London’s Archive of Modern Conflict onto a King James version of the Bible. Both projects relay a discomfiting relationship between text and image that calls into question the authenticity and reliability of either medium. Like image/text work by Barbara Kruger or Richard Prince, these projects speak to post/modernist conversations about appropriation and plagiarism as strategies for making politically engaged work. At the same time, Broomberg and Chanarin’s archival installations do more than expose power and past folly; they read as opportunities for commemoration of the present, reminding viewers of what Broomberg calls the “parallel universes operating in tandem”—torture, war, prison, and the like—largely out of sight.

Broomberg was raised in South Africa; Chanarin, from age seven on, in Britain. The two now live and work in London. The following conversation took place in March 2014 via Skype with Broomberg; Chanarin made additions via email.
RACHEL SOMERSTEIN: When you started working together at Colors, did you think of yourselves as artists?

ADAM BROOMBERG: I still have trouble thinking of myself as an artist. I can’t speak for Oliver, but I certainly didn’t then, and I’m pretty sure he didn’t either. But the germs of our practice were present then. For instance, one was an image from the 1990s that we commissioned from a sign painter at a refugee camp on the border of Rwanda. It was six years after the genocide and there were still over a million refugees on this border. We asked this guy if he could render us an image of a Hutu and a Tutsi. His painting came out as this classic stereotype: the Tutsi long-faced, with a narrow nose, and the Hutu wide-jawed and with a broad nose. We used it in the magazine. But afterwards, we thought through how it suggested that representation is implicated, it’s part of something—rather than an event that is separate from the genocide. It’s culpable, or explicit. So the themes that we are dealing with now, were there when we were at Colors.

RS: Your earlier work was inspired in part by Janet Malcolm’s book The Journalist and the Murderer (1991), in which Malcolm writes about the trust that sources accord to reporters, and the degrees to which reporters violate that trust. I’m curious if you have ever felt uncomfortable about taking photographs and, relatedly, if that’s one reason you’ve moved to the archive, because it’s as if the damage is already done.

AB: Yeah. We were re-rehearsing that damage. We were performing it over and over again. And as much as we tried to invert that, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with the process, to the point that I couldn’t deal with it anymore, that one-way flow of power. It’s such a toxic process, especially in those circumstances when you’re in locations that are governed by a strict hierarchy of power—prisons and refugee camps—which have been the site of so much documentary photography since the nineteenth century. We found ourselves inevitably aligned with power and unable to undo that equation.

You answered your question brilliantly: the damage was done. It’s evident in these archives. I think that’s our primary motivation, when sifting through these archives: to understand that process of damage. To reveal it.

OC: I think we were drawn to the archive for different reasons. It isn’t that we’ve abandoned taking photographs. In fact, just last week we shot a new series—of eggs! Why eggs? Everything about photographing an egg is determinable. It is the perfect modernist object—true and always performing as expected. This is why learning to photograph an egg was the first exercise for students in the Bauhaus.

We have never been very concerned with authorship, however, and I think that comes out of the fact that there are two of us. How do you locate an author with a duo? That may be why we have also been drawn to archives, because we don’t get too pedantic about images we take or images we find. And historical context has always interested us.

AB: It’s not artwork about the art world, or replying to it. It’s much more curious about the world. We both stand by that.

RS: Was there one particular instance that made you say, “I just can’t do this kind of work anymore”?

OC: On our first assignment for Colors, in a refugee camp on the border of Rwanda and Burundi, we hired translators in the camp to help us communicate with the people we wanted to photograph. After we had returned to Europe, we received alarming letters from these translators, describing how they had been badly beaten for collaborating with us. It was thought that we were working for the Burundian government, making a census perhaps. We realized with horror our effect and what was at stake, dropping into a community like that.

AB: It was a few weeks before [former chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization Yasser] Arafat died, and we were invited into his compound in Ramallah. We sat down to this ludicrously formal lunch, and then were given a couple of minutes to take his portrait. On the way out of Tel Aviv airport, Israeli security, who obviously knew where we had been, X-rayed this film a number of times in an attempt to damage it. Later, when we made a contact print, there was a green band running through the image. At first we were mortified, but then we realized: that was the most interesting fact. It blew apart all of these notions.
of photography: that the biography of a picture is 1/125th of a second, that it's sealed and it's fixed. In this case, the Israeli security were part of the image; they were able to write on top of the negative. So it also blew apart this notion of authorship.

And it made clear how the image has an extended biography. As Ariella Azoulay writes, the image has a cinematic, much longer lifespan, rather than a very short, sealed one.

We didn't quite realize it at the time, but that turned our practice on its head. We said, "OK, let's interrogate this idea of authorship, of accident or chance." You can see that theme running over and over again in our work.

RS: The book seems to be a preferred form for you. Why is that?
AB: It's not super-conscious. It probably stems from our magazine work. The book felt like a natural place, or space, to function in. But subsequent to that, we've been able to explore the more performative, more collaborative, sculptural mode that being in a museum or gallery affords artists. That has become more and more exciting.

For instance, if you pick up a copy of our *Holy Bible*, you would assume that we worked in a linear narrative, from page 1 to page 729. But in fact, we didn't. We did it all digitally; we had a PDF of the King James version of the Bible, we had all these images on a
RS: Is there anything people would be surprised to see on your bookshelves?
AB: A book I was obsessed by as a kid: Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women [1971]. God, I used to look at that for hours a day.

RS: [laughing] Talk about text and image!
AB: Completely. Will McBride did this book, Show Me! [1974], of photos of children of his friends. It's an overly intimate look at teenage sexuality; it's, like, fourteen-year-old boys with erections. Read now, the guy would be in prison. But if you looked at this book without prejudice, and didn't assume the worst, it could just be seen as a progressive, lovely act. It's so funny how images are so policed.

RS: Why do you think there's so much anxiety about images?
AB: I think it's because it takes work to be troubled by words. Whereas images function as the lowest common denominator. They are so much more in the public realm. Also, they can be manipulated, they can be used. [Susan] Sontag has that famous example—how the same images were used in the war in Bosnia by both sides. The fact that they are so slippery, and they're aligned to nobody, and don't pronounce their political allegiances so easily, means that they're dangerous in a way that words are not.

RS: Your press is called Chopped Liver Press. Where did the name come from?
AB: We were both fed chopped liver as kids on Friday nights, so we have these horror memories. And you'd probably know “What am I, chopped liver?”—but the thing is, nobody knows that saying in England. People thought it was some kind of medical condition or something.

RS: [laughing] I was also fed chopped liver, but then at a certain point it became vegetarian chopped liver, and that was better.
AB: How do you make vegetarian chopped liver?

RS: It's a lot of mushrooms. Mushrooms and fat. It's not bad.

The Revolutionary from the series Shtik Fleisch Mit Tzvei Eigen (2013) by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

AB: Oh god. With grated egg on top?

RS: No, we didn't have it with that. We had the marrow though, that would be roasted and then put on bread. It was really disgusting.
AB: We had that too. Shtetl food. The shtetl thing is fairly important. My mum went to a dinner party at a relative's who'd been doing research into our family tree, and she looked at this thing, and she saw Ollie's family on it. We're cousins - we're from the same village in Lithuania. Luckily we're not going to have children together.

RS: "The shtetl thing is fairly important." Can you elaborate on that?
OC: Our most recent project is called Shik Fleisch Mit Tzvei Eigen. You don't get any more shtetl than that. It's a Yiddish insult meaning, "Piece of meat with two eyes." Adam swears that this is what his grandmother called his mother every morning.

Like our first project, Trust, this most recent one focuses on the face as a piece of a puzzle in an argument about portraiture, rather than a resemblance of a human being. What struck us about the new 3-D facial recognition technology that we used for the project is...
taken by US military on duty in a prison. Through contacts at AP we learned that they find people who have posted these photos on their Facebook pages. Then they call them up, and they offer them one hundred dollars, and they [AP] get access to that image. They actually have more people on social media now than they do journalists on the ground.

RS: What’s next?
AB: We’re about to start a really exciting project. In making the film Catch 22 [1970, directed by Mike Nichols], it turns out they shot every day for six months, from 12 to 2. It was shot in Mexico, but set on an island in Italy. The footage shows a totally untouched coast in Mexico, in Guayama, right opposite Baja California. In the film, it’s just pristine. And now it’s chockablock American hotels.

We wondered what happened to all the footage that didn’t make it into the film. We got a hold of Paramount, and for months they denied it existed. Last summer, we got an email out of the blue saying they’d found a huge chest of eleven hours of unseen footage, which had been in this chest since 1968. We decided to make a nature documentary of the footage.

RS: So you’re basically moving between nonfiction and fiction to create a nonfictional documentary.
AB: Yeah. The furthest we’ve gone with that before is that we teamed up writers and artists and we said to each writer, “Write a fictional biography for the artist.” We got them to inhabit that, mostly unsuccessfully. It was mostly about that weird juncture between fiction and the document.

RS: That seems to be happening more and more—the juncture between fiction and document. Just yesterday I saw this Australian film, Lore [2012, directed by Cate Shortland], based on experiences of kids of Nazis whose parents were taken to prison after the war. As Germany was being divided, the kids had the experience that refugees of the regime had, in terms of trying to make their way through the forest and trying to survive. To be personal for a moment, that’s how my grandparents survived—in the forest. And this fictional film seemed the most true depiction of that experience that I’ve ever seen. But what was so uncomfortable was that we were asked as viewers to experience that through Nazis. I was thinking, what is going on with the fiction of nonfiction? It’s as if it’s the only way we can access these things that are so horrible.

AB: Also, fiction is afforded the license to explore these things. Because nobody is going to get into an uproar, because it’s fiction, right?

But just speaking of that, the Archive of Modern Conflict, which we mined to make Holy Bible, is the most extraordinary place. It explores war through photography from the beginning of the medium until now, but it’s all the unofficial versions: they’ve got the biggest collection of Nazi soldiers’ private albums. This is just bewildering, because you’re looking at young men being very sensual with their own children, or with each other, playing, being tactile. It’s a narrative we haven’t been afforded

that it operates in what its inventors call a non-collaborative mode. That means that for the first time in the history of portraiture, the photographer and the subject no longer need to collaborate; the technology can render a full facial portrait without that. It’s a long way from the shetel! But, at the same time, not really.

RS: You have worked with paper photographs that bare the materiality of different uses, and attempts to manipulate or hide what they show. But then you’ve also worked with digital archives, for War Primer 2. Can you talk about the differences of each archive in terms of what you’re looking at, and the questions that you’ve asked?
AB: It’s interesting that you say digital archive, because I never really think of it as an archive. Because it’s unruly, it’s liquid, much more than an archive is in the traditional sense—you know—120,000 images all shelved. For instance, we found this one image on both pro- and anti-Zionist websites that shows white phosphorous that was apparently used in Gaza. That is what we were exploring: how images are so unstable in the digital archive—if you want to call it an archive.

We were also exploring the weird politics and economics of it. The best example of that is the Abu Ghraib images that appear in War Primer 2; they’re licensed to the Associated Press. How on earth does the Associated Press get access to licensed images

Yossy Arofat (2004) by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin
before. And it's so creepy because you don't see these regimented, disciplined, non-people performing their "duties." You see young men being young men.

RS: Which is much more dangerous and scary than the other narratives.

AB: Yeah. And it's so interesting to what extent these narratives have been defined by what's been allowed out. The archive had a whole file on a ghetto called Lodj. This archive shows upper-middle-class, very well-fed Jews in the ghetto, having these mad, opulent dinners holding their pets in their arms, until the day before they were taken out of there. No Jewish Holocaust archive wanted it because it didn't fit in with the notion of the absolute victim quite far along into the war.

RS: Do you feel that you are repairing any damage in re-examining these archives? It sounds almost arrogant to suggest that trauma can be resolved in re-looking, as though an individual can do that. But I wonder if you have that sense when you're re-looking at these archives, whether digitally or on paper.

AB: It's a very good question. I think it operates on a number of levels. For instance, the work in South Africa was very cathartic on an emotional level. But I think the word arrogant is right, in assuming that we're correcting anything. We're more alerting viewers to the way language functions, and the way the language of the archive functions, and the way the language of photography functions.

I think looking at the archive, or technology, or materiality, is a way of examining our mistakes. Making a general point about how images are complicit in a genocide or trauma means we were complicit—and we still are. For instance, say we abstract an image in Belfast, during the Troubles. Those fragments of images are still somebody's ankle that you see. Maybe you don't see the whole body. But that person's mother will still recognize her child's ankle. In other words, there will be somebody who's wounded by whatever you're producing. And you can't help that.

RS: You've spoken a lot about failures—can you talk about one project in particular you'd classify as such?

OC: The work we made in Afghanistan in 2008—The Day Nobody Died—has failure built into it from the start. Obviously we failed to represent the news in any figurative sense. We also failed the soldiers who were escorting us through the theater of war, as they call it, by subverting the embedding system [and not making the expected kinds of images]. We failed the viewer who came to the work with a whole range of expectations about what we, their witness or proxy, might bring back from the front lines to show them.

RS: Your work is so influenced by literature. What are you reading?

AB: I'm reading this [holds up a copy of Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1958 The Voyeur]. Also Norman Mailer's The Fight [1975].

OC: I'm reading the memoirs of Jacob P. Adler—a terrible book. Adler was one of the great Yiddish actors of his time. At the end of his life he wrote this extremely pompous book about his life on the stage. But what's happening outside the frame of his narrative is totally fascinating. Kind of The Godfather meets John Cassavetes.

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