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Ph The Postgraduate Photography Research Network

Interview with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

Posted by [Ben Burbridge](#) on Wednesday, September 7, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

I conducted the interview below with artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin in November 2009 as part of my Ph.D. research. While I was particularly interested in the relationship of their work to earlier instrumental uses of photography, specifically within nineteenth-century science, the conversation touched upon a range of topics. Images from all the projects discussed can be viewed on the artists' website: www.choppedliver.info

BB I wondered if we could speak first of all about your project *Trust*, and what you set out to record in those photographs?

OC When we started working on *Trust*, we didn't see them as portraits. We saw each picture as a piece of an argument about the photographic gaze. We didn't really speak to those people, we didn't ask them their names. It was a very cold, objective attempt to record the effects of...

AB These outside stimuli.

OC But it was also self-conscious. It was playing with that scientific language, the way each of them were photographed in a very similar way. The way we showed them at the Hasselblad was as this long strip...

AB Which again, plays with that comparative scientific language.

BB What size did you print them?

OC We made the heads life-sized.

BB And in terms of the practicalities of actually making the work, were you drawn to particular people or was it more what they were doing that was important?

OC It was first of all what they were doing. We thought about activities that involved almost out of body experiences within very ordinary environments.

AB Activities that engaged the person to the extent that they couldn't be present for the photographic moment. So we would ask permission, but because the outside stimulus was so strong they were unable to engage with us. That was the kind of pre-requiem for defining the environment.

OC Then there was casting involved.

AB We'd look at things like bone structure or whatever, and then the degree to which they looked absorbed in the picture became the main consideration in the editing process.

OC Even if they weren't absorbed.

BB In her introductory essay in the book, Val Williams quotes your working notes, and the fact that you suggested that getting consent from these people was essential for you.

OC Yes. The person gives their consent and then they're immediately robbed as, when we take the photograph, they are unable to contain themselves. I think we've always been really concerned with that, even when we were working with *Colours* and doing the *Ghetto* work, we were always quite perplexed by people who agreed to be photographed. You would go to somebody and ask if you could take their picture and we would expect them to say no, because why would you say yes? We've often spoken about Janet Malcolm and her book *The Journalist and the Murderer*, where the relationship between the journalist and the subject is so fraught, and it is perplexing to her why people speak to her in the first place, and I think that in a way we've transposed that onto photography.

AB There's a little film we did as part of that *Trust* work. Towards the end of the book there are people who are under general anesthetic – which in a sense is the ultimate degree of external stimulus, or the opposite.

So we set up a film camera above the operating table, and we asked people to engage with the camera up to the point when they go under, so you witness this person disengaging.

OC It was amazing that experience, because we ended up sitting with the patient before they went into the operation for quite a long time, they had this pre-med, which would just sort of relax them, and then they would start talking to us. We would be left alone with these patients, sometimes for hours, and there was this one guy who we made the film about. He was speaking in an English, or London, accent, then he had his pre-med and this changed to an Irish accent, then gradually as the conversation moved on and he became more and more medicated, he started speaking in a kind of Indian accent, and we realized that as he was going under and becoming more and more vulnerable, the archaeology of his life was slowly being exposed.

AB I think this idea of consent is crucial to so much of our work. This was our first experience of being a part of the power structure, because we would be dressed up in our green doctor's clothes and the only thing we would take in to the theatre with us was a camera. So immediately there was this assumption that because we had permission from the hierarchy of the hospital, we were part of the authority, so people gave us permission, I would assume, more readily.

That experience was very similar to all the work we made for *Ghetto*, visiting those gated communities, because once you have permission to go in and have the camera as a kind of prop, it links you immediately with authority...

OC In the hospital, I remember that, when we shot this, not one person said no, and we photographed about twenty or thirty people under anesthetic.

AB People hardly say no to anything in a hospital, like 'can I come and stick a tube up your penis?'

OC The patients had given responsibility for themselves over to the institution. Something similar happens when a person has a camera. A person absolves themselves and says 'What do you want me to do?' 'How do you want me to look?' That's the power relationship, and Malcolm argues that that happens with journalists too.

AB I think that's very true of *Ghetto*. We were semi-self-conscious about choosing places where power functions in a pronounced way. The history of photography in those places is one of surveillance and asserting power, right? So we went in and tried to upset that, often through the writing and the people we collaborated with. I think the writing's crucial. Because if you took some of those images we took back then and made them black and white, they'd look like nineteenth-century ethnography.

OC We both said that we wanted to try and undermine this anthropological perspective, but actually the kind of interviewing which we did was also in the vein of anthropological field studies.

AB But I think the broader writing was questioning who was in power, and how it worked. And we would always look for the complexity of a situation, rather than narrowing down or simplifying it.

BB There seems to be visual strategies as well, that attempt to undermine a sense of the straightforwardly documentary – it's not just image and text. There are pairings of images that seem to self-consciously reflect on photography's more instrumental functions. The refugee camp for example, where you have the passport photos next to the group portrait, which are two completely different forms of photography – one showing the boys as interacting social agents, the other completely objectifying. There seem to be various visual strategies aimed at that kind of undercutting of a straightforward documentary mode.

OC The other language that was influential was crime photography. This idea of the photograph as evidence. You look at some of the photographs we made in the prison, like the one of the shoe: it's positioned in the middle of the frame, the light is very even, and it's very much a reference to this image as a kind of evidence.

AB It's a caricature of that language. It's similar to ethnographic imagery. You put the person in the centre of the frame, there's no artifice, there's no tweaking...

BB It suggests transparency...

AB It *suggests* transparency.

OC I think the image in *Fig.* of the one meter rule is a great example of a similar thing. The purpose of this thing is obviously to give scale, but if you photograph it, it becomes nonsensical in those terms.

BB I think it's interesting to read *Fig.* in relation to *Ghetto*, because *Fig.* seems like a recognition on your

part that even those techniques you were using to try and undercut the anthropological were – not necessarily flawed – but *Fig.* seems to acknowledge that perhaps there was an imbalance structurally inbuilt in terms of your relation to your subject, that you couldn't avoid. Do you think that's fair?

OC I think that's very fair.

AB I think it's fair on a number of levels, and it depends how personal we want to get. The impulse was worrying, and then also the techniques and the structure of it.

OC We got very interested in Renzo Martin's work. He talks about this civil contract between the artist or the photographer and their subject and how there's a promise that's made when you pick up a camera and want to take a picture of somebody, and the promise is that this is somehow going to help you in some way.

AB So it's all a false promise...

OC ...and we started to respect that equation.

BB So when you started out making the work for *Ghetto* did you think it was a promise you could honour, at least to an extent?

OC I would say we did.

AB I think we really believed in the project of documentary photography and the possibility that it could enact change, or at least to provide a more complex understanding of these issues, but not necessarily a more complex understanding of the medium of photography and its dark histories. I think in that way, we started waking up during that process and thinking, 'hang on a second, are we just reenacting what we've come to criticize?'

BB Because although you are critiquing, that power structure remains essentially unchanged, so you might almost risk a kind of re-validation of a particular kind of documentary mode...

AB When we started doing talks, we got progressively down on that work. The more I thought about it, the more negative I became. But something really interesting happened for me recently when we met Ariella Azoulay, who wrote *The Civil Contract of Photography*. I met her in Israel, having read a lot of her work and really having come to respect her, and she said that out of all the projects we've done, it's *Ghetto* that she really enjoyed, and we're talking about one of the most progressive thinkers about documentary.

The way she talks about photography is a very interesting thing. She suggests there is this contract, but it's not an instant thing, it's very long. She talks both about the photographer being there, the camera being there, the protagonists being there, the witnesses being there, and she reads photographs not in terms of this instant impact, but as an almost cinematic form, where they have a long life, and they will be read in many different ways. There's a lot of possibility for histories and readings to change. So I don't think you can just whack that entire project with the idea that it keeps the power structure exactly integral as it was.

OC We were definitely trying to undermine the power structure, but I think your reading is right. *Fig.* then acknowledges that it was flawed, even though it was a good intent. I mean if you look at the work of somebody like August Sander, who was someone who was documenting society, he was either doing something that was utopian and inclusive or he's doing something macabre that was an extension of what was to come, which was Nazi Germany and separation. So it's the way you contextualize it.

AB I think another important thing to mention is the way we became more and more aware of the process, but also the materiality of the image. I think *Fig.* was the beginning of that, because we've always shown it at 4 x 5, which was aimed at recognizing the limitations of photography, the process of framing and the mechanical reproduction of it.

More recently, we've spoken about that picture of Arafat we took and the X-ray damage that happened to that. Because we took that picture of Arafat and then when we came back the Israeli Defense Force x-rayed this thing thirty to forty times and this caused this line of damage. But only subsequently did we start talking about how that damage is more important than that mediocre photograph of someone in power.

BB Which acknowledges precisely what you were saying about the image not operating as a single moment, this sense that it almost has its own history...

AB It's long. And there are many authors to that thing, including the Israeli Defense Force.

OC We're doing this project at the moment at *Belfast Exposed*. We went there and we looked through their

archive, which is essentially amateur photography made in the last thirty years by people attending photography workshops. They're pictures which range from recording the troubles and demonstrations and riots and cars on fire to the other extreme of people at home, drinking tea, having sex, girlfriends naked, people doing moonies, whatever. But all in one line of film. You might have a contact strip where the first picture is of a riot and the last picture is of someone doing a moonie.

We thought they were fascinating pictures of the troubles, but what we found most fascinating was the way historians and other people had gone back and looked at this archive and left their markings. So first of all the photographer had made a selection, and had erased aspects of the image that they didn't want, and then someone else had put a sticker on something, then someone else had drawn a cross on that sticker, so there was this whole history of engagement. So this idea of the photograph as one moment becomes undone, it becomes this extension of moments.

BB It sounds, then, like *Ghetto* was a process for you, it was a way of thinking through or around what you were doing, and this was changing the whole way through, as you became more aware of how photography has been used in the past. Were there any particular writers or thinkers or experiences that really pushed that thought process forwards?

OC I think that when we were really convinced about what we were doing, we were influenced a lot by Kapuchinski. When we were feeling confident...

AB When you look at Kapuchinski, he does have that naïve belief in 'the reporter' delivering 'information', and very much upholds this notion of the Western reporter who would come back with these images. I think the reason we loved him related to that famous Stalin quote, 'a million deaths is a statistic and one is a tragedy', and Kapuchinski would bring back that single story, that was emblematic of the whole structure. I guess that was part of what we were trying to do.

OC But then we started to feel more uncomfortable about it and realized that many of the people we were photographing were very naïve. They had no real understanding of what we were doing and that was most obvious when we were in the psychiatric hospital. You're photographing people who were highly medicated, who have never had their picture taken before, and we started to feel very uncomfortable. And although we were reading lots of things at the time, when we read that Janet Malcolm essay, it really crystallized something about the uncomfortable nature of this power relationship between us and the things we photographed.

AB Then also I think, more recently, those 1930s writers like Walter Benjamin, or Adorno, work that had been out there for eighty years...

BB But has seemed to gain new currency in certain circles during the past few decades?

AB Yes.

BB In the introduction that accompanies the photographs you made in the Cuban psychiatric hospital, you do make clear that you were very conscious of the dubious history of photographing the mentally ill – you explicitly mention morality in these terms. Were there specific instances in this history of photographing the mentally ill that you were particularly aware of, or was it more a general sense of the potential moral complications that concerned you?

AB For me it was more this general sense of disbelief regarding the extent of the access we were granted. I think that happened all the way from *Trust* up until work like *Ghetto*. Because you've been given permission by the authorities, it's as though you have free reign. I found that very disturbing. I remember that throughout that period I felt very uncomfortable, and thinking at the time that this probably meant we were doing something interesting, but feeling very uncomfortable...

OC So nothing's changed!

BB But you do deal with that discomfort very specifically with the portraits you made in the Cuban hospital.

OC There was work we were aware of, like Alex Majoli's work in Leros, and the whole Magnum way of recording.

AB Most of those photos are taken by the photographer who is standing on his feet and looking down at somebody prolapsed in an embryonic huddle.

OC Of course the other side of that was the scientific images of patients being electrocuted and what have

you. The history of photographing mentally ill people just felt like a very non-collaborative history. So we were trying to readdress that balance – I don't know how successfully. It was a pretty naïve goal really.

AB But remember we were also answering to very particular concerns at that time. We were working for a magazine that was publishing stuff that was available in photo libraries, all that kind of photojournalistic work.

OC There were some really uncomfortable moments between us as well. For example, can you remember that time that we were in the big auditorium in the hospital in Cuba? We were stood behind the camera trying to make everyone look at the camera – fifty people who were all severely mentally ill and heavily medicated – so I put my finger up to try and get them to look and then everyone put their hand up, so you had this room full of people with their hands up copying me. We took a picture but then when we got back we got into this big discussion about it, whether it was an abusive thing, whether it was funny – not whether it was a good or a bad picture – whether it was a valid picture. So we'd come to an agreement on some things, but other things were harder to agree on.

AB It was also interesting attempting to decide what our default option would be. Do we take a picture when we're in the midst of an argument, or not take the picture? In one position you're at risk of missing that photograph, in the other position you're at risk of losing your moral high ground.

OC In the end, I think we decided that taking the picture wasn't the action, but that publishing the picture was the action.

AB But I'm not sure I agree with that now. I've still got quite horrible memories of some of those instances. If we think about this photograph not simply as the moment of its publication, but from the point at which you actually decide to do it all the way up to the point where... well, it's ongoing. If that's the history of that photograph then those moments are critical.

OC But I'm not trying to be a perfect human being.

AB But if we're talking about reinforcing power structures, then taking that photograph is potentially like reenacting that imbalance of power.

OC These are the kind of arguments we would have! The position we came to in the end was, if I said to Adam, 'you can't take this picture, it makes me feel uncomfortable', he would resent it enormously, and the same applied the other way round. So we made the decision to let the process be a little more open in order for there to be room for both of us, so we could at least experiment with the discomfort of the situation...

BB What was the nature of your interaction with the people in the portraits you made in the psychiatric hospital? How far did you explain the project to them?

OC The auto-portraits? We just explained to them technically how to do it and that we were letting them take the picture.

AB And also we asked them to give us their narrative, because everyone had a narrative in terms of the position they had chosen. There's the one guy with his hand on his heart and his hand on his head who said that was his struggle.

But I think it's worth taking a step back with this whole photography and madness thing, because we made two projects: the one in Cuba, and one in a criminal psychiatric hospital in Alberta in Italy. That history in Italy is an interesting one, because in Italy here was a guy called Franco Basaglia, who rewrote the way psychiatric illness was dealt with. He started that practice that was then abused by Thatcher and Reagan, of care in the community, this idea of sending people back out, which was very progressive.

OC But there was this loop hole with it in Italy because the justice system hadn't embraced Basaglia, so in the prison system, mental health was still dealt with in the oldest sense...

AB Like Bedlam old. That place was the most horrific place I've stepped into. I remember there was this one moment there when we looked through a glass strip in a door and there was this guy strapped to a bed and he had a hole that he was shitting though into a bucket under the bed and so we took one picture through the window and then we went in and set up the camera and he lifted his head up and smiled at the camera. I think that speaks volumes about the power of the camera in there.

OC And about the way people respond to a camera. A man who can only move his head still looked up and smiled.

BB Which is something that seems to concern a lot of recent art photography, particularly portraiture: the

way people respond to the camera, or are prevented from responding to the camera. Which I guess brings us back to *Trust*, but you said that portraiture was never your frame of reference there...

OC Of all of our work, those people are more like objects than like people. We were very aware of that. There's the images showing dentistry, and when the dentist saw the pictures he phoned us up furious because we had objectified his clients in quite a horrific way.

BB But so much portraiture in recent years does seem to treat people as objects, even if they are objects that respond to the camera. A lot of recent work seems to have abandoned that traditional interpretive role of the portrait and become far more cold and detached. It's no longer about corroborating someone's identity, it's about staging or framing those ways that people perform for the camera.

AB In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay suggests quite the opposite, she's suggesting a possible way out for photography, that there is this contract that happens that is quite a positive thing.

OC One of the ways that we have spoken about our photographs in *Ghetto* is that they are not pictures of people, they are pictures of people being photographed. We the photographer are present in the image in their gaze.