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An obituary, of sorts, for the 'death' of artist duo Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

by [SEAN O'TOOLE \(HTTPS://WWW.1854.PHOTOGRAPHY/AUTHOR/SEAN-OTOOLE/\)](https://www.1854.photography/author/sean-otoole/)



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Reading Time: 7 minutes

On the opening day of Broomberg & Chanarin's posthumous retrospective at Catalan contemporary art centre Fabra i Coats, Barcelona, Sean O'Toole reflects on the duo's rich career, replete with experimentation and subversion, in light of its official end

The partnership of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin is no more. Eschewing an expression like 'divorce', the lauded collaborative duo, who began working together in 1998, and in 2013 became the first pair of artists to win the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, have proffered something more final. A [media release](https://www.barcelona.cat/fabraicoats/centredart/en/content/late-estate-broomberg-chanarin) (<https://www.barcelona.cat/fabraicoats/centredart/en/content/late-estate-broomberg-chanarin>) announcing a "posthumous retrospective" of their entire professional archive at the Catalan contemporary art centre Fabra i Coats in Barcelona opening today, 20 February 2021, states that the survey will mark the end of their collaboration. A separate [statement](https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/after-more-than-two-decades-of-making-art-together-broomberg-and-chanarin-commit-career-suicide) (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/after-more-than-two-decades-of-making-art-together-broomberg-and-chanarin-commit-career-suicide>) issued by the artists and the Goodman Gallery, which will represent their estate, confirmed the duo's cause of death as "suicide".

Cute? It depends on how you define cute. The photographers, who are not dead but rather symbolically marking the end of their collaboration, are fans of the late Groucho Marx, a brash comedian from a country where cute can also mean impertinent and smart-alecky. The title of their retrospective at Fabra i Coats, which will showcase their output in increments, including their archive of unpublished materials, is *The Late Estate Broomberg & Chanarin*. But, it could just as easily be chutzpah. Striking out as modish, editorial-portraitists with a gift for the gab, [Broomberg & Chanarin](http://www.broombergchanarin.com/) (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/>) evolved into forensic and febrile experimenters interested in the social meanings of photography. They frequently showed themselves unafraid to use Marxian effrontery – be it insult or caustic humour, or both – to get their points across.



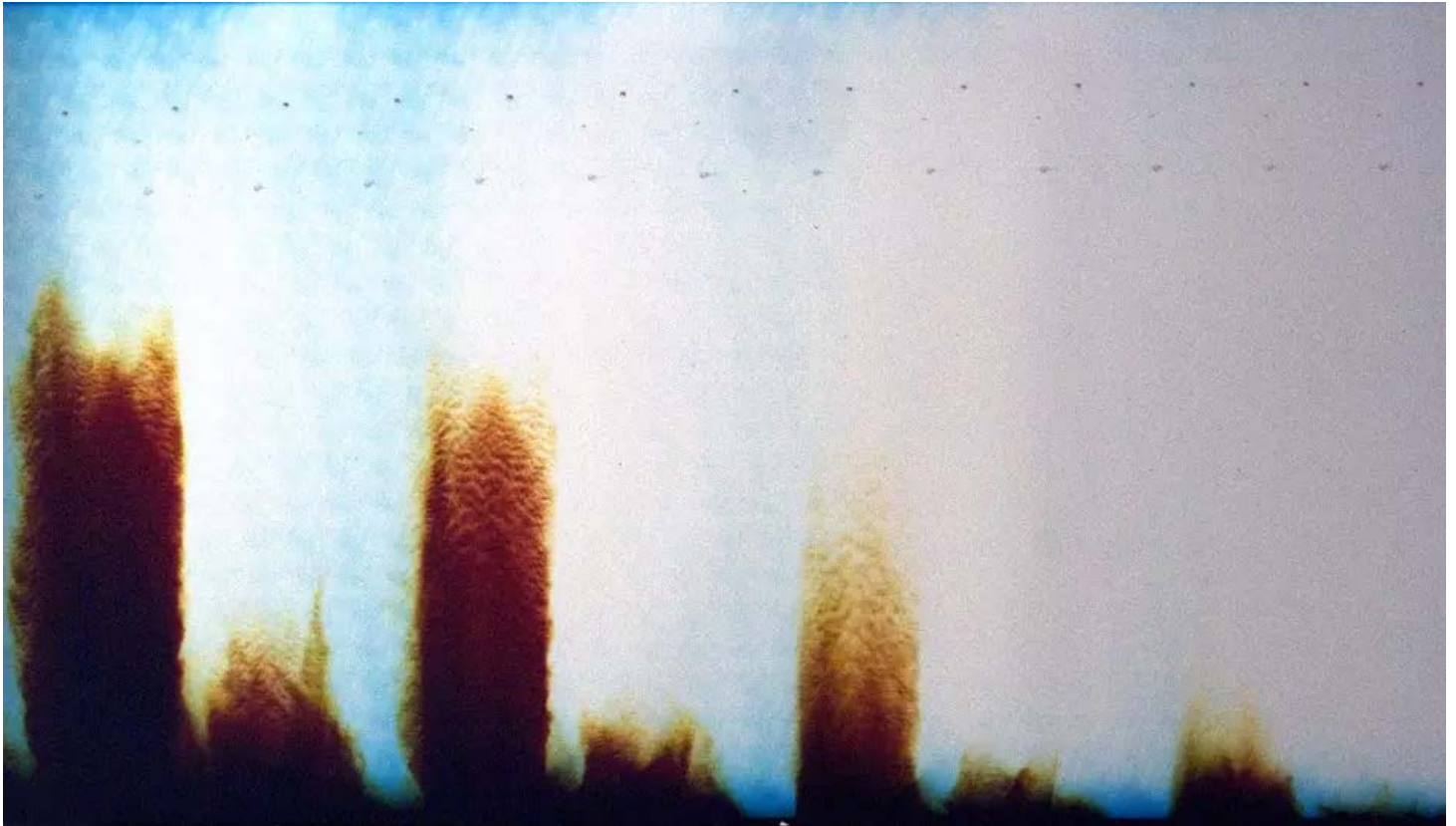


(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HOTSHOE_SCARTI_HIRES_1-808x1024.jpg)

From Scarti © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

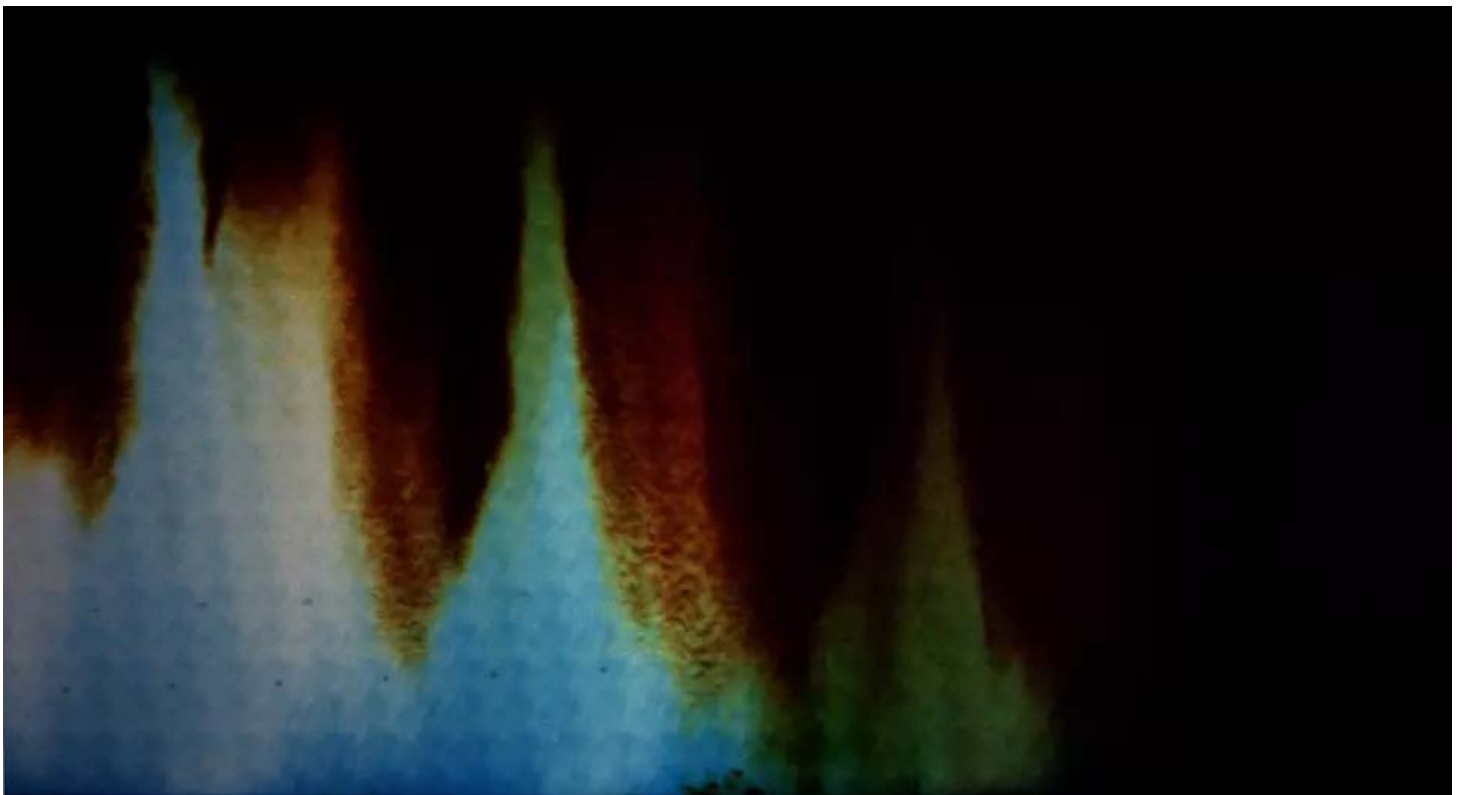
In March 2008, shortly after serving on the jury of the World Press Photo Contest, they published an [essay critical of the award's blinkered formalism \(http://www.broombergchanarin.com/text-unconcerned-but-not-indifferent\)](http://www.broombergchanarin.com/text-unconcerned-but-not-indifferent). Photojournalism, they asserted, is a "genre in crisis". Gesturing to ideas that would preoccupy them over the ensuing years, they pointed to the proliferation of poor images taken by onlookers and highlighted the symbiotic relationship between photography and conflict, leading them to wonder, "Does the photographic image even have a role to play any more?". Their broadside concluded with a call for a new language of photojournalism, "one that presents images that are more aware of what they fail to show; images that communicate the impossibility of representing the pain and horror of personal tragedy".

Dismissed as grandstanding villains by some, Broomberg and Chanarin shortly enacted their conviction when, in June 2008, they travelled as embedded journalists to Afghanistan. In place of their medium format camera, the pair operated as handlers for a 50-metre length of photographic paper rolled and sealed in a light proof cardboard box. Responding to a series of events – an execution, a suicide, a visit to the troops by the Duke of York, a press conference, nothing – they exposed seven-meter sections of the paper to the sun for 20 seconds each. In choosing this timeframe, they quoted the practice of early war photographer Roger Fenton, who employed large format glass-plate cameras and the collodion, or wet-plate, process, which required long exposure times of up to 20 seconds or more. From September to October 2008, they exhibited six photos from the series *The Day Nobody Died* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/the-day-nobody-died-1-1/>) (2008) in the east London gallery, Paradise Row. The exhibition generated only passing notice. *La petite mort*.



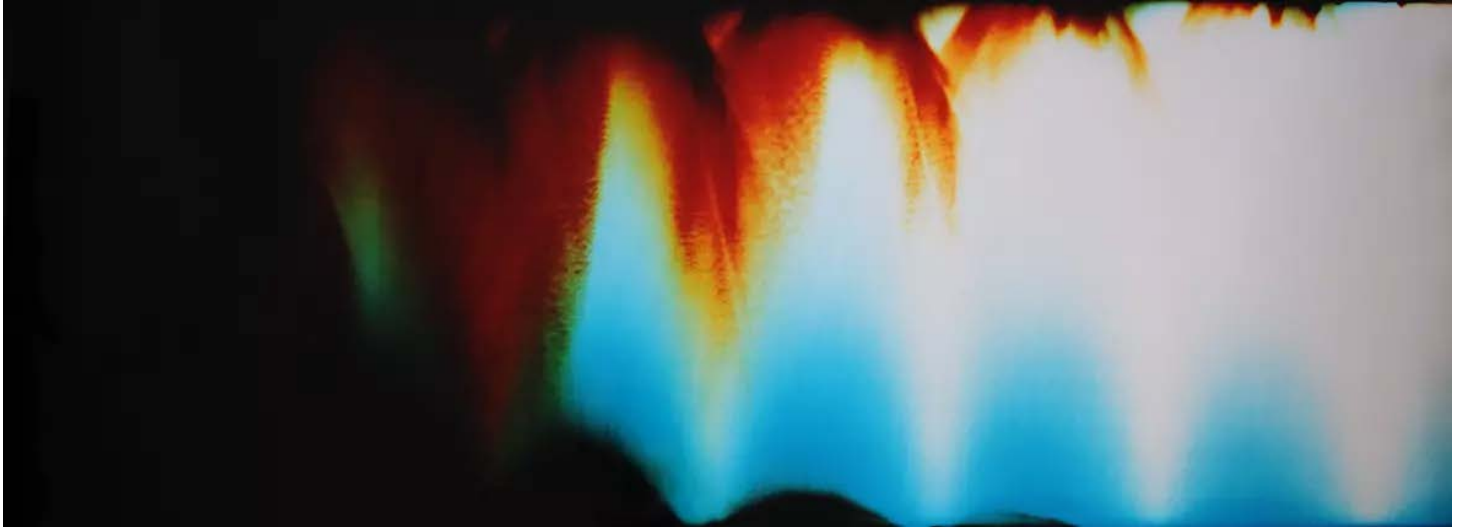
(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-day-nobody-died-II-detail-2.jpg>).

Detail from The day nobody died II © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



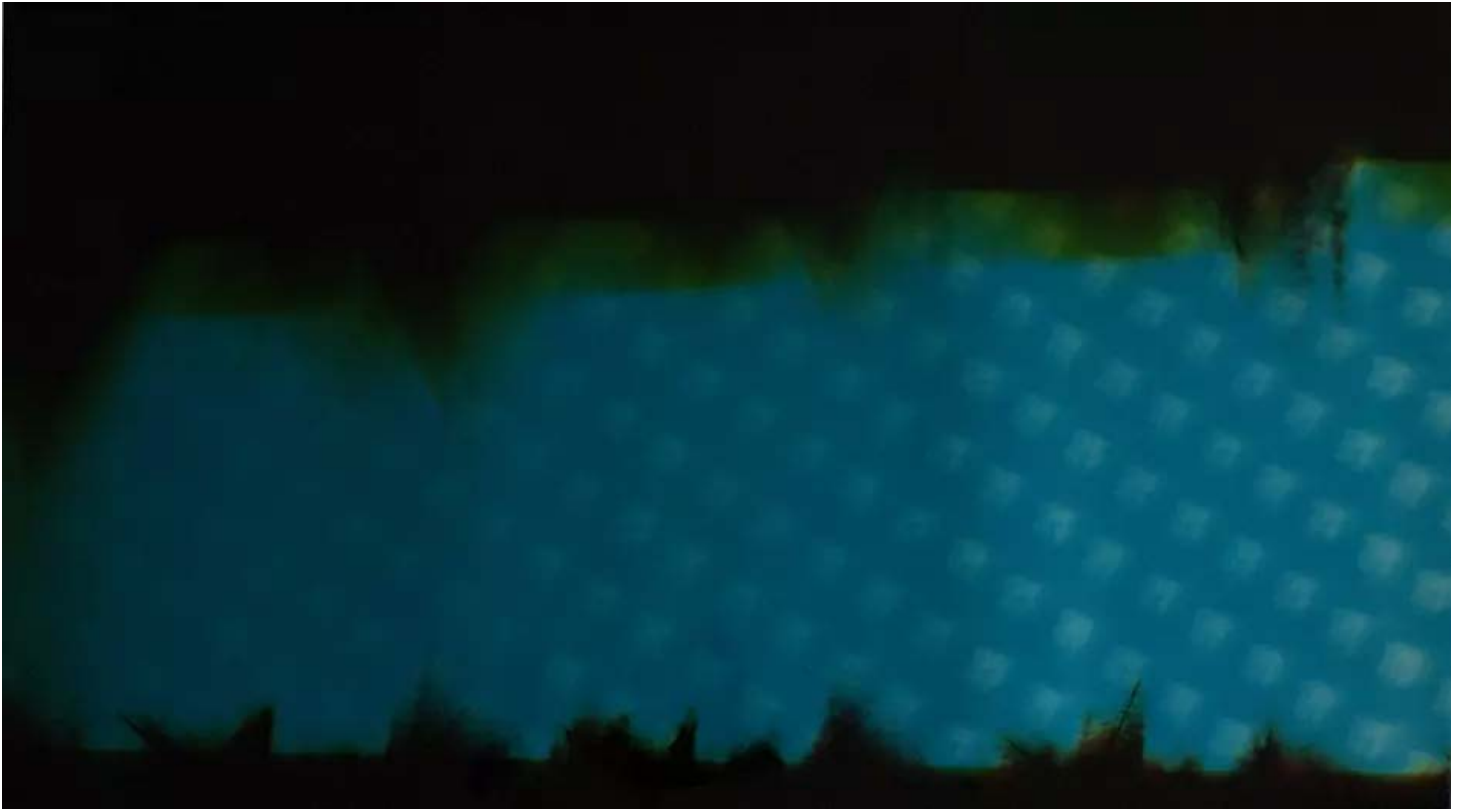
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Detail from The day nobody died II © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



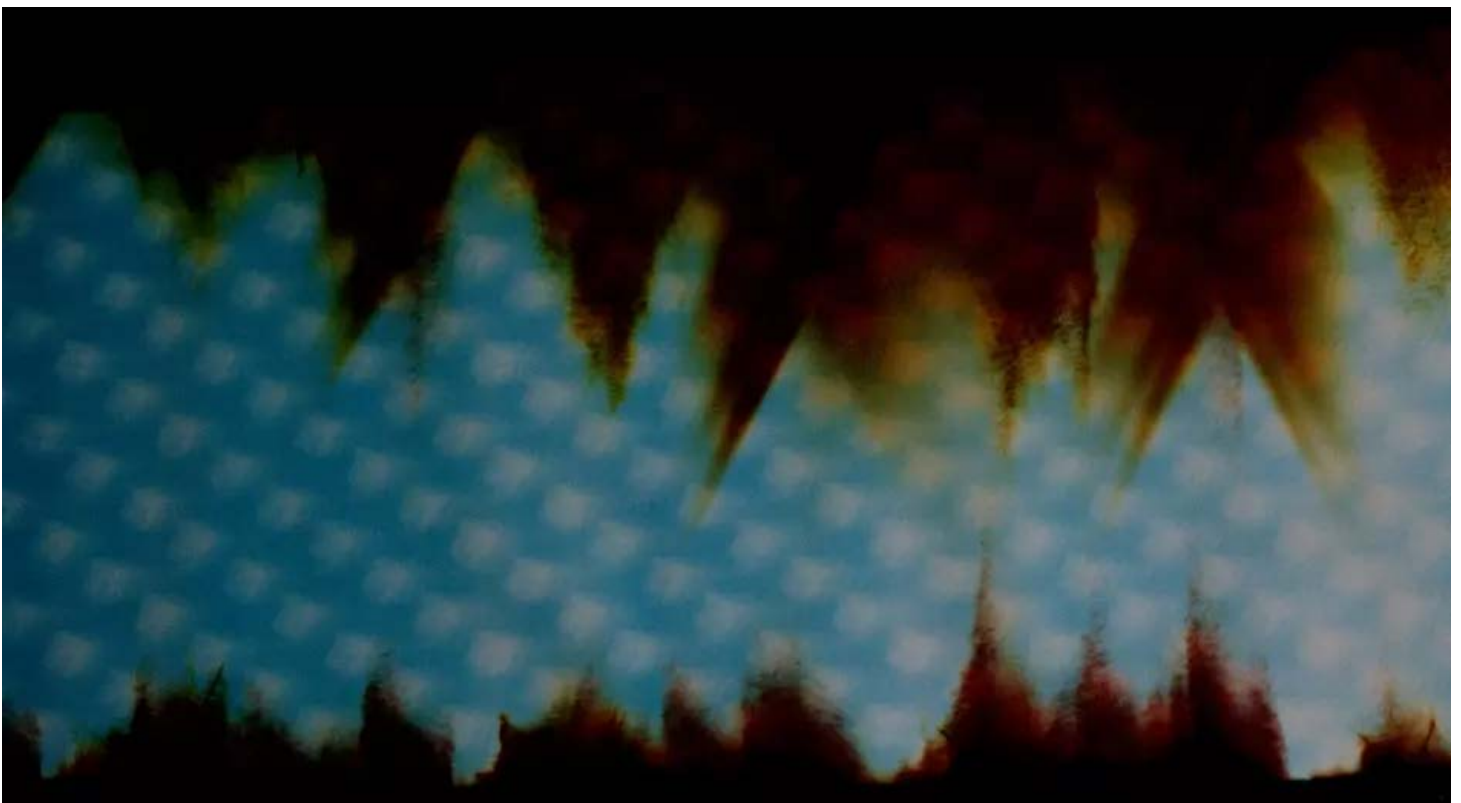
<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-press-conference-detail-1024x372.jpg>

Detail from The press conference © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-day-nobody-died-III-detail-2.jpg>).

Detail from The day nobody died III © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/the-day-nobody-died-III-detail.jpg>).

Detail from The day nobody died III © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

"Death is an awkward business," wrote anthropologist Michael Taussig after a 2002 visit to the grave of his intellectual hero, philosopher and critical theorist, Walter Benjamin, at Portbou in Catalonia, Spain. "And so is remembrance." Writing about the dead does nonetheless offer the courtesy of silent indifference: the dead don't bite back. Reflecting on Broomberg & Chanarin's career – its rehearsals, lulls, experiments, and bold statements – death emerges as a leitmotif. Its inevitability gave their roaming practice its urgency. A hand-printed poster issued by their publishing company [Chopped Liver Press \(https://www.choppedliverpress.com/\)](https://www.choppedliverpress.com/), which features a quote from Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) printed in bold red letters onto a page of *International New York Times*, is emblematic: "Be furious you're going to die," reads the poster.

Death also informed their initial association. In 1995 Broomberg, a sociology graduate born in Johannesburg, secured a job as an editorial intern at [Colors \(http://www.colors magazine.com/en/home\)](http://www.colors magazine.com/en/home), an influential photo-led magazine overseen by photographer Oliviero Toscani. Three years later, Broomberg invited London-born Chanarin, a philosophy and computer science graduate with a shared liking for portrait and documentary photographer August Sander, to work with him on an issue of *Colors* with the theme of death. Something clicked and their incipient creative association shortly yielded a book, [Trust \(http://www.broombergchanarin.com/trust-1\)](http://www.broombergchanarin.com/trust-1) (2000), a series of tightly framed colour portraits of gamers and surgery patients, and an invitation to jointly edit *Colors*.





(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ghetto-1-780x1024.jpg>).

From Ghetto © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.





<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Ghetto-Scan-71-771x1024.jpg>

From Ghetto © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.





(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ghetto-7-782x1024.jpg>).

From Ghetto © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.





(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ghetto-8-775x1024.jpg>).

From Ghetto © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

Working in collaboration with various photographers (notably [Stefan Ruiz](http://stefanruiz.com/) (<http://stefanruiz.com/>)) and writers, they roamed the planet documenting closed communities: a refugee camp in Tanzania, a prison in South Africa, an asylum in Cuba, a remote encampment in Patagonia. Methodologically, the impudent new documentary style of Louis Theroux and Sacha Baron Cohen informed Broomberg & Chanarin's early work in the field, especially for *Colors* and their subsequent book project in South Africa, *Mr Mkhize's Portrait* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/mr-mkhize/>) (2004). However, in formal terms, their portraits of subalterns and grandees reiterated the anthropological gaze of Neue Sachlichkeit photography and its many rehearsals in 1990s art and editorial photography.

I accompanied the photographers to Leisure World, a gated retirement community in Orange County, California, for an issue of *Colors*. I was tasked with interviewing the dog club and a nude model. We've collaborated subsequently. I have frequently been asked about the division of labour between the two, and who did what. The question overlooks a defining action, their identification as a unit, and its relationship to the cultural moment. Collectivity and collaboration, argues art historian Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), is one of the "most persistent themes" in radical contemporary art of the new millennium. A 2011 exhibition project, curating Photomonth Festival in Kraków, Poland, bears this out.





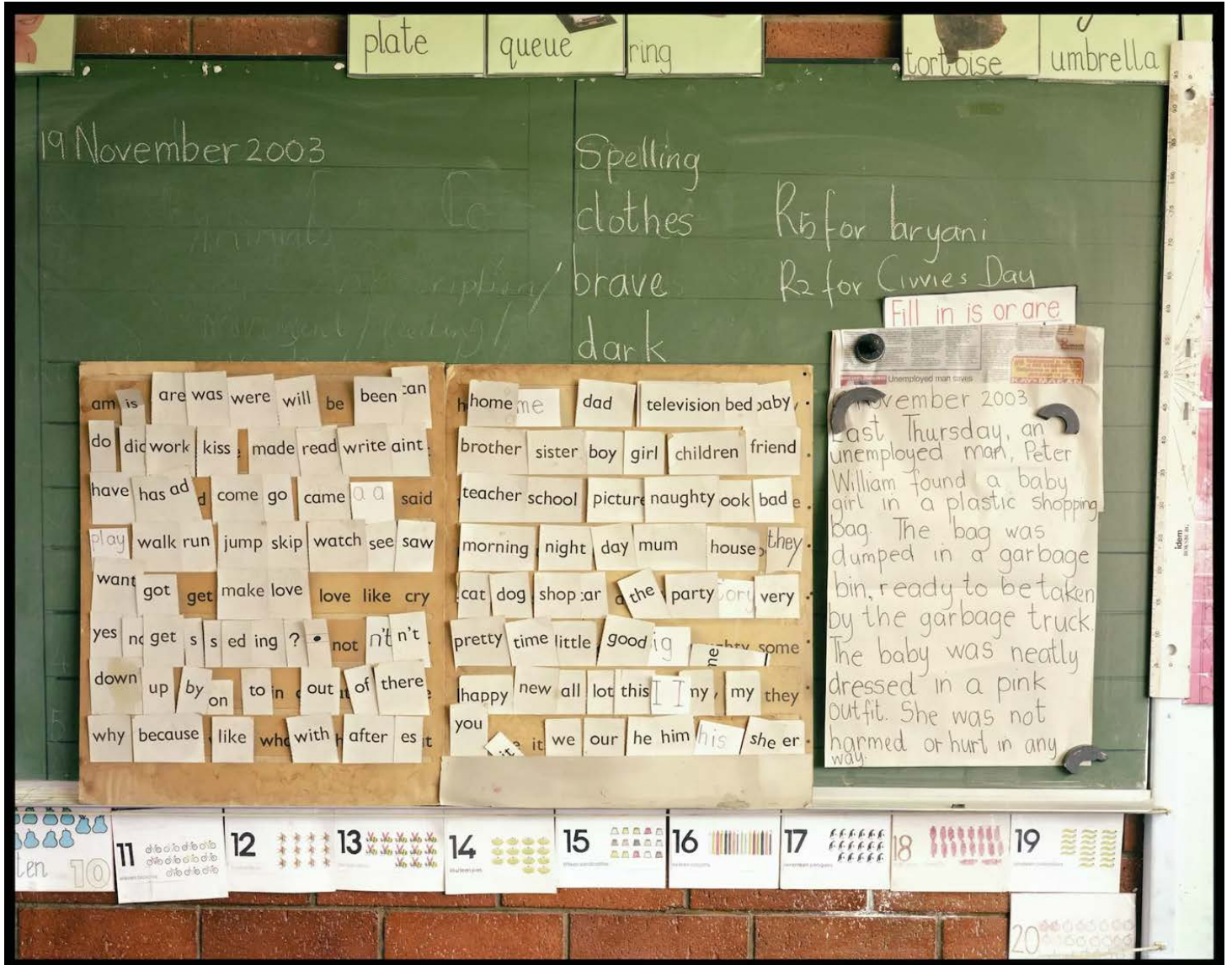
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From Mr. Mikhize © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chanarin-1-smaller-820x1024.jpg>

From Mr. Mikhize © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2934_Work-1024x811.jpg).

From Mr. Mikhize © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

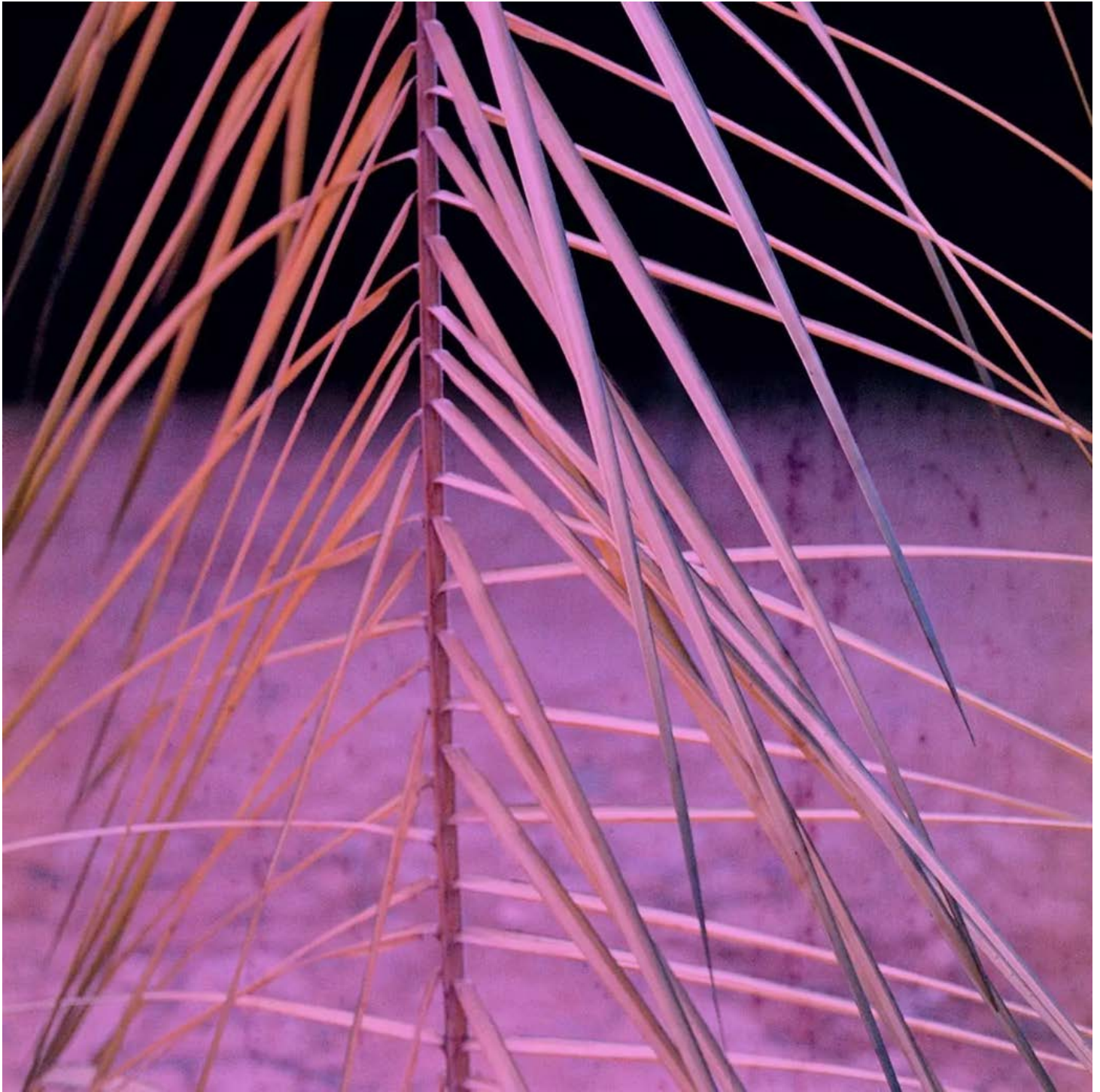
When they were asked to guest curate Photomonth Festival, the photographers invited 23 writers (including Ekow Eshun and Lynne Tillman) to each create a text describing an invented persona. They then assigned these personas to artists and photographers (including Gabriel Orozco, Alec Soth, and the late David Goldblatt) to inhabit. The idea drew on Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's creation of fictional heteronyms for his polyphonic output. The Australian writer and art critic Jennifer Higgie, who was paired with Jeremy Deller on a contribution to the exhibition, described *Alias* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/alias-1-1/>) as "one of the oddest, most enigmatic and imaginative shows I've seen". Their personal exhibitions by distinction, particularly after the thickening of favourable opinion around their practice in 2013, were hit-and-miss affairs.

Their 2015 debut with London's Lisson Gallery included a video of a martial performance accompanied by austere still-life photos of military-grade prisms and bullets that had collided and fused. A follow-up 2017 exhibition included *forensic images* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/every-piece-of-dust/>) of hairs and other fibres from the rug covering Sigmund Freud's couch in the Freud Museum in London. The work lacked the propulsion of earlier projects like *The Day Nobody Died*, which was included in the Tate Modern's 2015 exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography*, and *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/to-photograph-a-dark-horse-in-low-light-1-1-1/>) (2012), an examination of the racial bias in the chemistry and processing of Kodak film products that included new and archival photography, found material and sculpture.



(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/kodacolor-1024x1024.jpg>).

From Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light (2012) © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EDD0054P_01-1024x1024.jpg).

From Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light (2012) © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/paradise-row-04-09-12-16-1024x682.jpg>).

From *Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* (2012) © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

Perhaps given their apprenticeship in editorial, it is their [15 books](http://www.broombergchanarin.com/publications-1) (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/publications-1>) that distil the energy and arc of Broomberg & Chanarin's insurgent, but never indifferent practice. *Chicago* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/chicago/>) (2006), a series of bland documents of a mock settlement used by the Israeli military for urban combat training presented in book form, marked a crucial pivot. Together with *Red House* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/red-house-1/>) (2006), a suite of photographs detailing marks and drawings on the wall of a political building in Kurdish northern Iraq, *Chicago* announced their break with the humanist anthropology of their *Colors-era*. Their practice increasingly became sedentary, retrospective and carnivorous, frequently ingesting other people's photography, mostly in bits, but sometimes whole.

Issued in a small edition by Mack, *War Primer 2* (<http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/war-primer/>) (2011) overlays found photos and other visual data trash from the multi-site War on Terror onto Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer*

(1955), a compendium of news photographs captioned with biting, four-line poems by the German playwright. Brecht's anxieties about photography, that it was "a weapon against truth", as Broomberg & Chanarin wrote in 2011, dovetailed with their own. [The Deutsche Börse jury](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/10/deutsche-borse-photography-prize-2013-broomberg-chanarin) (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/10/deutsche-borse-photography-prize-2013-broomberg-chanarin>) described the resulting book as a "bold and powerful reimagining" of Brecht's work; art critic Sabrina Mandanici disagreed, [describing the updated book as "less precise, rigorous and self-critical than the original"](https://collectordaily.com/claudia-hans-silent-songs/) (<https://collectordaily.com/claudia-hans-silent-songs/>). (Split juries were a hallmark of their career.) *Holy Bible* (2013), which interpolates strange and violent images from the Archive of Modern Conflict into the King James Bible to argue that photography is congruent with the Abrahamic divine in its commitment to catastrophe, is a continuation of *War Primer 2*'s essentially parasitic method. Its publication prompted critic Sean O'Hagan to describe them as ["the most politically engaged artists working in Britain today"](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/11/deutsche-prizewinners-new-work-holy-bible) (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jun/11/deutsche-prizewinners-new-work-holy-bible>).



Like one who dreams the road ahead is steep
I know the way Fate has prescribed for us
That narrow way towards a precipice.
Just follow. I can find it in my sleep.

(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/01_War_Primer_silk_screen-copy-828x1024.jpg).

From War Primer 2 (2011) © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AB_34_F1-1024x867.jpg)

From Chicago © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



A cloud of smoke told us that they were here.
They were the sons of fire, not of the light.
They came from where? They came out of the darkness.
Where did they go? Into eternal night.

(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/23_War_Primer_silk_screen-copy-824x1024.jpg).

From War Primer 2 (2011) © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.



(https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AB_8_f4-2-1024x867.jpg).

From Chicago © Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin.

In a 2015 interview, Broomberg, who now lives in Berlin, and Chanarin, who is still based in London, likened the start of their collaboration to two bullets colliding in mid-air. The violence of the collision was catalytic, providing combustible energy for a creative partnership marked by their striking metamorphosis from photojournalists to artists. "Photojournalists make photographs that arrest us and that are hard to argue with," the duo wrote in 2011. "But they cannot help us demystify the results. It is the role of the artist to interrogate and challenge this system."

They are now embedded in this system: since 2016 Broomberg and Chanarin have been professors of artistic photography at the University of Fine Arts (HFBK) in Hamburg, and in 2020 both presented solo projects under their new, solo monikers: Broomberg has created an interactive artificial intelligence alter ego (<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/adam-broomberg-nik-christensen-the-moon-looked-down-and-laughed/>), adam.baby, trained by Broomberg's entire internet history of thirty years, and Chanarin has an [upcoming solo exhibition](https://www.1854.photography/2020/05/oliver-chanarins-new-installation-for-sfmoma-is-inspired-by-amazons-automated-distribution-hubs/?hss_channel=fbp-40055265495&utm_campaign=ptg941~claudine_derksen~bjp_online_editorial~26_may_2020~) (https://www.1854.photography/2020/05/oliver-chanarins-new-installation-for-sfmoma-is-inspired-by-amazons-automated-distribution-hubs/?hss_channel=fbp-40055265495&utm_campaign=ptg941~claudine_derksen~bjp_online_editorial~26_may_2020~) at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art inspired by Amazon's automated distribution hubs and filled with photographs of his wife Fiona Jane Burgess, on which they collaborated during lockdown. News of their deaths, it would appear, is overstated.



(<https://www.1854.photography/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Truck-1024x770.jpeg>).

[The Late Estate of Broomberg & Chanarin \(https://continguts-www.barcelona.cat/fabraicoats/centredart/ca/projectes/3812\)](https://continguts-www.barcelona.cat/fabraicoats/centredart/ca/projectes/3812), Fabra i Coats Contemporary Art Centre, Barcelona, is on show from 20 February to 23 May 2021.

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Sean O'Toole is a writer and editor based in Cape Town, South Africa. He has published two books, *Irma Stern: African in Europe - European in Africa* (2021) and *The Marquis of Mooikloof and Other Stories* (2006), and edited three volumes of essays, most recently *The Journey: New Positions on African Photography* (2020). He has contributed to recent monographs by Onejoon Che, Margaret Courtney-Clarke, David Goldblatt, Jo Ractliffe, Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Mikhail Subotzky. He is a contributing editor to *Frieze* magazine.

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