

A review by Elayne Jude, 17dragons Photography
The purpose which motivates war reporters in their early years becomes blurred over time; assuming that journalists are largely attracted to their work by altruistic impulse, the desire to propel change through exposure of suffering and injustice. It is difficult to see exactly if or how that change is coming to pass. Clarity is lost; cynicism lies in wait.
The photographer stands above the morass because he cannot duck the risk-taking, or seek shelter in commenting from behind the lines. The imperatives of his work demand that he expose himself to extreme danger ("if you weren't close enough, you weren't there") and pay the psychological price of having seen what few of us are required to.

Why do it? Does it make a difference? Is it voyeurism? Are these men and women driven to bear witness?
Is it possible that as troops become addicted to the mad adrenalin of sudden violence, so too do war writers and photojournalists? Annie Liebowitz, of her experience in Sarajevo, says war correspondents simply aren't satisfied by the quotidian world after the stark compulsions of war.
Adam Broomberg and Colin Chanarin are artists and photographers who have turned lately to working in a broader field. They have rejected the immediacy and mass circulation of traditional war reportage, and experiment in different spaces.
Their short film "The Day Nobody Died" explains why. It was made in June 2008, during their week embedded with a unit in Afghanistan. It turned out the bloodiest week since the invasion. On just one day out of seven there were no British or Afghan casualties.
A large cardboard box, anonymous, rectangular, sealed with parcel tape, is loaded into the back of a car, driven through London and flown out to Afghanistan. It's transported continually in various Army vehicles, loaded and unloaded by troops in deserts; finally, on the fifth, bloodless day, unwrapped.
It contains a sealed lightproof box. Inside, a roll of photographic paper. The paper is exposed to the sun for twenty seconds. The composition of the work is abstract, incidental, determined by factors that are completely random. It's a contrivance of utter artlessness.
This is Broomberg/Chanarin's response to the dilemma of the contradictory experience of the embed, which they see as collusion rather than journalism. The embed is given unprecedented access to war; the military in turn have total access to you. Work is scrutinised and sanitised at the end of every day. There is a long list of taboos.
(Other cultures construct their acceptable images according to rather different criteria. Here, in Britain, in Western Europe, in the US, we are removed from the raw, we have been able to afford to grow squeamish).
The work they have produced is their way "to resist or to interrupt the narrative they wanted us to describe". It's a total avoidance of traditional reportage. It has no value as evidence, can't gain significance through proximity to danger. It's not conventionally beautiful, glorious, piteous, emotive, interesting, dramatic, or possible to anticipate. It's tedious, like war. A long low rumble of subterranean unease persists.
They compare the minimalism of the box, in its power to evoke and to suggest rather than to dictate meaning, to Kubrick's monolith and its sculptural antecedents, and to John Cage's famous four-minute silent concerto. They've moved into the territory of deep theory; the problem of representation. They discuss WG Sebald's *On the History of Natural Destruction* [review coming soon], about the bombings of Hamburg, the notorious unreliability of eyewitness accounts, and the inevitable resort to cliché "...that fateful night" "...hell had opened"...as though trauma of such magnitude produced an overload, a paralysis of imagination. Hence, the transformation of mutilated bodies spewn by a roadside into polite headlines. (My own mental image at this point is of immaculate white gloves on a polished coffin).
Broomberg/Chanarin point out that they are not offering their work in place of photojournalism; it's not a rival or a substitute. They are so numbed by the over-familiar

vocabulary, and so deeply suspicious of the congruence of war- and image-making (quoting Susan Sontag, who describes photography as "part of the machinery of war") and the manipulations of the military and of the media, that they want to relocate their work to a space which is conducive to a slower, quieter contemplation. The film has been shown in a gallery in London and a museum in Rotterdam.

Their change of direction in search of a more truthful image grew out of two experiences. They visited Headley Court, and spoke to the soldiers recovering there. A lot of their injuries were sustained travelling in Snatch vehicles blown up by roadside bombs. Broomberg/Chanarin describe riding in these vehicles during their embed. The journey was six hours long. Roads were rough. There are only two vents. Some soldiers set out on these journeys, they say, with tourniquets already tied around their limbs (superstition and a kind of ghoulish fancy-dress as much as practicality?) Yawning claustrophobia and absolute helpless passivity; the tedium of possible imminent death and mutilation. Quietly, the horror, the horror.

The other catalyst was their judging the World Press Awards 2008. 81 000 images were submitted. Almost none were graphically violent, raw, upsetting. And almost all absolutely numbing in their predictability.

The images that struck them most were taken during the assassination of Benazir Bhutto from 10 metres away. Hardly images at all; not figurative, not identifiable, but blurs, jagged, slashes and ghosts of colour. Who would ever know what they document, within verbal explanation? Very, very beautiful. Their beauty, say Broomberg/Chanarin, is accidental, and unfortunate.

Alex Majoli has been a Magnum photographer since 1996, and a full member since 2001. He introduces his presentation by saying it is a very short extract from a lecture he gives on how he became a war photographer. Somehow that preps me for words. But there are none. Just a few minutes of classical, black and white, largely figurative photography on a very big screen. One does not know the exact details of who what where when; there are no captions or voiceover. There is a sense of drama, of mystery, an empathetic quickening, an irresistible response to beauty.

If I write far less about Alex Majoli's contribution, it is because there is no substitute for looking up his work for yourself. Yes, it is in a mainstream tradition, and what we are conditioned to expect, and find easier to process. It is also haunting, transfixing, exquisite, wholly humanistic.

9/11 has been described as "an image defeat", and has kicked off an image production arms race. Both sides vie to produce images which outdo each other ♦ the toppling of Saddam's statue; the beheading of Nick Berg; suicide-bomber video-notes; George W's shipside victory broadcast. Broomberg/Chanari are signalling, time out; Majoli is saying, here is more. How do they differ in their quest for a more truthful image? Majoli says: The problems are exactly the same.

Anthony Borden asks: Is the Broomberg/Chanari discourse a counsel of despair? Is not the war photographer making an heroic effort which cannot be denied, however flawed? Does it not come down, in the end, to what any individual can achieve in the given circumstances, and to the exercise of native wit and cunning?

Broomberg/Chanari's intention is to investigate what it means to be a 'moral witness'. For them, now, that means, to be a refusenik. They are, Borden points out, making art, in London. Majoli says, gently, reasonably, that often, one is serving the channel, the agency, the paper, not oneself. A journalist in the audience points out that what has been missing from the discussion is the news-making perspective.

Broomberg/Chanari close by showing a post 9/11 fashion shoot called STATE OF EMERGENCY. It depicts the usual gaunt young woman at an airport checkpoint, pinned to the floor by security staff, on her knees in front of a menacing uniformed figure carrying handcuffs or a baton. This gets an immediate response, and the most emotional of the evening. I haven't seen these pictures

before, and judging by their reactions, nor has the majority of the audience of students, academics and practitioners, who break into an applause which seems to say, Yes we see, we understand you, we endorse.

Perhaps we've uncovered a genuine surprise. These fashion shots are a more shocking proof of our decadence than torched corpses by the roadside. Perhaps there's subversion going on in unexpected places.

Paula Jaegar reviewed:

This Is War! Robert Capa at Work
Gerda Taro
On the Subject of War
Barbican Art Gallery reflects on conflict and its visual representation.
17 October 2008 - 25 January 2009
Barbican Art Gallery

Director of the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, Anthony Borden, chaired a seminar on Images of War at the Barbican, 4th December 2008. The event was in honour of these exhibitions featuring the work of war photographers, from Robert Capa in civil war Spain, to recent responses to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Taking part were artists/photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. Magnum photographer Alex Majoli stood in at the last minute for Guardian photojournalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who was delayed at Kabul.

The Institute of War and Peace Reporting supports local journalists in conflict zones. Borden identifies his main business, and that of IWPR, as print journalism. But anyone working in conflict, he says, is indebted to photographers</p></div>