

**Broomberg and Chanarin, *Fig.***

Julian Stallabrass

[‘Broomberg and Chanarin, Fig.’ in Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Fig.*, Photoworks/ Steidl, Brighton/ Göttingen 2007, n.p.]



**Broomberg and Chanarin, *Osprey Egg*, Booth Museum, Brighton**

At a glance, this book of photographs and texts, with its quirky leaps from one theme to another, may appear to be a darkly humorous trawl through some outer reaches of oddity: fake mermen, obsessive egg collectors, big-game hunters, and those who numerically classify their collections of soft porn. The eccentricities of its arrangement are matched by those of many of its subjects. Yet the misapplication of control and classification systems regularly produce graver consequences that run through the book, a deeper pulse below the whimsy and amusement: in it, animal bodies are measured and displayed, human bodies—living and dead—are similarly dealt with, whether they are female models of different colourations (photographed for the enjoyment of *Sunday Telegraph*

readers), or giants or the remains of ‘natives’. Also, at the extreme, that depictions, especially in photographs, may be used to complement the type of classification—‘Tutsi’, for example, written in a passport—that brings death on its subject. In conversation, Broomberg and Chanarin have said that, despite many horrific photographs of genocide, racialised mass killing still continues, and this book points to the other side of that remark—that *because* of depiction, it continues.<sup>1</sup>

Much of *Fig.*, then, is about objectification, description, representation and classification carried to the ultimate point of the power over life itself. The flowers in Kigali’s Hotel des Milles Collines may stand as memorials to those who hid there during the Rwandan massacre, though equally for another type of assessing, grading, cutting and killing in the imported art of flower arranging. The ramshackle skeletons of giraffes, elephants and rhinos in a museum of natural history in Chad stand as a register of another attempted genocide in Darfur. The empty London offices awaiting civil servants in the event of an attack point to the ambition of some Islamic fundamentalists to slaughter people—any people—who live in godless imperial states.



*Room 201, Hotel des Milles Collines, Kigale, Rwanda*

Against the deadly threats that difference (once perceived and described) may engender, powers erect numerous physical and conceptual bulwarks. The beacons with which the book begins were set up to warn of invasion. Elaborate systems of racial, ethnic, religious and cultural discrimination were built to assist colonisers to know their subjects, and control them through divide-and-rule policies. (That our current categories are crude in

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the author, March 2007.

comparison is hinted at in the sequence of model types photographed by Broomberg and Chanarin.) In assembling such systems, artefacts, images and even body parts were collected assiduously and systematically. Photography was extensively used in making and documenting such distinctions, just as now it is an essential tool in controlling the flows of people across national borders. The book begins with a protective beacon, guardian of the British coast and state, and ends with a view of Europe from Tangiers, taking the position of the yearning gaze of the would-be invader.

Systems of classification must still time and reduce the flow of chaos and contingency to the conceptually graspable and the materially manageable. So bodies are dissected, mapped, drawn and photographed, veins filled with wax and nerves laid out on boards. Here, science, medicine and the technologies of warfare go hand-in-hand. Wounds are anticipated, and drawn on the body, to be held up for examination as secular stigmata; the religious appeal to their gods by commissioning crude paintings of their accidents—delineated, stilled, framed—to hang in chapels, guarding against further acts of divine wrath; museums mount, label and display stuffed skins—frozen objects of knowledge for the taxonomist, and of wonder for the general viewer. In all of this, there are affinities with photography: that camera and film appear to peel the skin from things, and do immobilise and frame them; or in another model, that the traces left by light on film are like the impacts left by physical objects on surface and skin—sharing their character with footprints, scars, tattoos and even sunburn. Yet, of course, the affinities go beyond these metaphorical links, for the technology of photography has, almost since its inception, been used to measure, classify and police.<sup>2</sup>

Broomberg and Chanarin position themselves against this nexus of representation and domination by at once enacting and criticising its processes. In much of their previous work, they have played with the documentary and ethnographic traditions, having people present themselves before their large-format cameras, and relaying their subjects' statements. Wielding the sharp edge of fashion technique in accomplished lighting, high resolution and sensitivity to the modelling of the face, they cruelly illumine the physiognomies of their subjects, revealing frailties, flaws, poverty, ageing, the marks of labour and trauma alongside the pose, pride and pretentiousness that resist them, and do so with all the merciless photographic inspection applied to the examination of haute couture. The cruelty is applied equally to the ostensible subject and photographic convention, and through the latter to the implied viewer whose motives for looking are held up to the light. The results have been both sentimental and grimly comic, and have enacted and explored exploitation (just as, in his installation and performance pieces, Santiago Sierra has done by paying people to put themselves in degrading situations).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There is a large literature on this, but for one of its pioneering essays, see Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, no. 39, Winter 1986, pp. 3-64.

<sup>3</sup> See Kunsthau Bregenz, *Santiago Sierra: 300 Tons and Previous Works*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2004.



*TK Name, TK Models Agency, London, UK*

In this book, stepping back from documentary and ethnography in favour of photography of the collected and the classified, including photographs themselves, Broomberg and Chanarin pursue another method. The eccentricity of the subject selection is their own, as is the arbitrary, changeable and erratic character of the links between each element, so that in the first pages we move swiftly from the Armada (the origins of British naval supremacy, and thus of its empire) to the Booth Museum's strange collection, to the death of an egg collector who falls out of a tree. Excessive instrumental objectivity is set against its apparent opposite—the subjective play of imaginative and artistic freedom in which conventional rational categories are dissolved. It is no accident that the structure into which Broomberg and Chanarin set their subjects (along with the fusty bourgeois empiricism of some of them) recalls Surrealism, and particularly Max Ernst's collage novels with their collision of classification, conventional narrative and the sexualised unconscious.<sup>4</sup> Ernst's figures, cut from the illustrations to novels and encyclopaedias, are swept out to sea in their beds, assaulted by hybrid humans with wings or birds' heads, or spout fountains from their top hats. Surrealism, wrought by mechanised warfare, recoiled

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<sup>4</sup> Max Ernst, *La femme 100 têtes*, 1929; *Rêve d'une petite jeune fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*, 1930; *Une semaine de bonté*, 1934; a full account may be found in Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, trans. John William Gabriel, Thames and Hudson, London 1991.

from all the works of instrumental reason to find refuge in poetry, unfettered love and spontaneous violence—and even in a photography turned to snatch evidence of the marvellous from the mundane urban environment. The parallel can only be taken so far: Broomberg and Chanarin, despite the politicised character of much of their subject matter, have produced no manifestos and have not aligned themselves with a political movement, so the positive character of their critique of classification and conquest can only be guessed. It seems to lie close to the general art-world endorsement of a privileged subjectivity over the dull world of reason and bureaucracy which is mocked through the cliché of its unreflective frock-coated Victorian gentleman with his iron-clad belief in empiricism. The dereliction of such ideals is suggested by the empty plinths that once carried human remains, now returned to the ground, and in the neglected, disintegrating skeletons in the Chad museum.



*Israeli Defense Force photo studio, Tel Aviv, Israel*

Furthermore, the critique of *Fig.* implicitly reflects back on Broomberg and Chanarin's own previous documentary work. Various features of *Fig.* place it firmly in the field of conceptual photography, which has regularly staged acts of classification so as to undermine them. First, that many of the photographs depict things already represented, and are comparable to the work of the first flush of photographic postmodernism in, say, Richard Prince's advertisements or Sherrie Levine's copies of photographic prints by modernist masters. Second, that composition is held to a functional minimum, being a straightforward, descriptive view of the subject, which does not make its artistry (or with it, the subjectivity of the artists) evident. Third, that many of the 'documents' are of dubious documentary status—being misdescribed, faked, absent or useless. Broomberg and Chanarin examined that concern in their earlier book *Chicago*, photographing a

simulation of a Palestinian urban environment, used by the Israeli Defence Force for training, along with diverse landscapes of Israel that, while purporting to be documents, did little to support the claims made in the text, suggesting rather that such scenes were pretexts for various forms of political projection.<sup>5</sup> Such techniques have often been associated with political scepticism, or at least with an interest in political image rhetoric which is pursued at the expense of an interest in political content; and indeed, if *Ghetto*, with its examination of various imprisoned and gated communities, held out at least implicitly the ideal of freer and more fluid gatherings of people, *Fig.* offers no such political consolations, only the micro-utopia of the individual artist's free imaginative gestures in the face of objectification.<sup>6</sup>

If the critique of classification and representation is taken seriously, it presents the writer of a text such as this with a deep problem. The typical components of such texts exhibit the very features that are being held up to critical examination. These elements are, naturally, familiar to those who habitually read such essays in exhibition catalogues and monographs: a description and conceptual ordering of the components of the project; the situation of the artists in a diachronic and synchronic frame, against both 'tradition' and the field of contemporary art, which serves as part of the project's validation as 'art'; a situation of those components against suitably sanctioned theory; and the larding of these classificatory moves with sufficient rhetorical inflation to suggest that this is, in fact, a poetic enterprise in which the sensibilities of artists and critic have forged the text in sympathy, to the glory of both. (Of course, to get to this point, I have had to do a little of all that above, but it is now time to throw away that ladder.)

Generally, Broomberg and Chanarin have not had recourse to this type of writing. Instead, in their previous books, *Ghetto*, *Mr Mkhize's Portrait* and *Chicago*, they have used the words of their subjects, their own words, and those of various writers who have focused less on the photographers themselves than on their subjects.<sup>7</sup> For example, *Chicago*, carries an admirable essay by Eyal Weizman on Israeli Defence Force tactics for the control of urban space, along with a bibliography about Israeli-Palestinian relations.<sup>8</sup> We do, however, know what a Broomberg and Chanarin art essay looks like, for they published one by Val Williams in their first book, *Trust*.<sup>9</sup> Like *Fig.*, *Trust* was less of a documentary and ethnographic project than Broomberg and Chanarin's other work, and more an overtly conceptual photographic series. Williams' essay sketches out the situation of the photographers' work within a broad art pantheon, past and present, that includes Tillmans, Gursky, Manniko, Evans, Dijkstra, Sander, Avedon, Wearing, Emin, Goldin, Calle and Taylor Wood. It also offers an efficient rhetorical context for the work, based around a swiftly recognizable image of a persisting Dickensian London:

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Broomberg/ Oliver Chanarin, *Chicago*, SteidlMACK, Göttingen 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Broomberg/ Oliver Chanarin, *Ghetto*, Trolley Ltd, London 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Broomberg/ Chanarin, *Ghetto; Mr. Mkhize's Portrait & Other Stories from the New South Africa*, Trolley Ltd, London 2004; *Chicago*.

<sup>8</sup> Eyal Weizman, 'Frontier Architectures', in *Chicago*, n.p. The essay does offer some suggestions in its conclusion about the role of representation in Israeli conceptions of territory, and of the examination of that role by Broomberg and Chanarin.

<sup>9</sup> Val Williams, 'Beyond the Surface: Photographic Works by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin', in Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Trust*, Westzone Publishing, London 2000, n.p.

...their London is a city of the imagination, a place of ritual and myth, of pain and survival, ecstasy and anticipation.

Their focus is not solely on a bohemian or style-conscious centre, but equally on the crumbling and melancholic suburbs where contemporaneity jostles uneasily with the shambolic history of a metropolis built from speculation and the mercantile imagination.

Like narrators of some eerie twentieth-century fable, Broomberg and Chanarin make their way through a strange landscape of myth and allegory, telling an epic tale of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and absence.<sup>10</sup>

It matters little that the pictures in *Trust*, which show people's faces in close-up at the cinema or the beautician, or at prayer or having undergone surgery, contain few clues to an urban environment, and could have been taken in any reasonably affluent city, for the point here is the evocation of an atmosphere of ineffable mystery that complements the task of classification and situation. So the art essay, while purportedly an exercise of sovereign subjectivity, also undertakes the necessary theoretical and historical classificatory spadework to insert a project into the field of art.



*TK Luigi and Maria wedding album, Lingualglossa, Italy*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

There are various tactics for dealing with the problem of the tension between the two components by ensuring the predominance of one or the other, and in the process breaking down the standard format of the art essay. One is an overtly subjective, performative criticism, which is seen in a wide array of writing from the journalistic display of a constructed persona (an extreme example is Brian Sewell who plays the posh, gay dandy) to the academic revelation of feeling in a footnote.<sup>11</sup> To take this option is to settle firmly on the side of subjectivity, in a self-confident flaunting and preening of the individual sensibility. It is a tactic that, in our present circumstances of state killing, kidnapping, arbitrary imprisonment and torture, in short of a return of the bloodied imperialism referred to by the artists, is so self-satisfied and indulgent, that, if I could bring myself to adopt the idiom for a moment, I would have to say that it makes me want to gag. After all, a steadfast attachment to the virtues of subjectivity is as effective a form of producing domination as a belief in objectivity, and the impulse to domination lies at the heart of any art work.<sup>12</sup> It should not be forgotten that Breton wrote that the ultimate Surrealist act was dashing out into the street and firing a pistol at random into the crowd.<sup>13</sup>

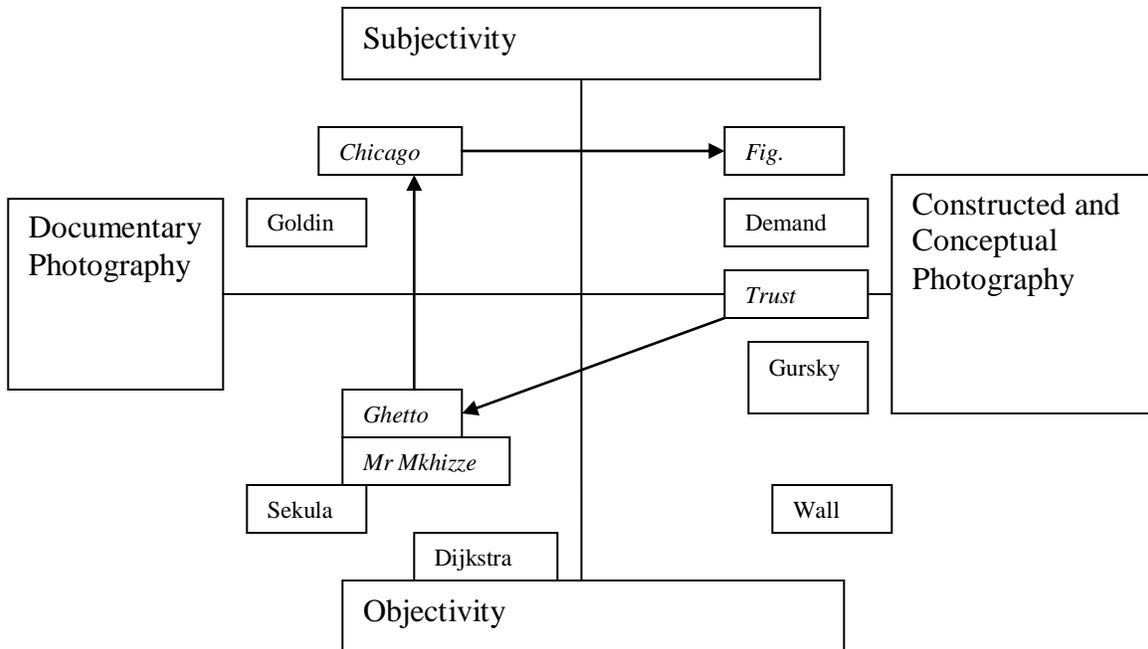
Another option, more rarely seen, is to pursue objectification and classification to such an extreme that, freed of the veneer of sensibility and poetry, they stand nakedly for what they are, and their purpose becomes clear. A description of Broomberg and Chanarin's trajectory could be offered, not in rhetorically-soaked, rich 'critical' prose, but in a diagram:

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<sup>11</sup> For an examination of the latter, see Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2005.

<sup>12</sup> This is one of the arguments of Adorno in his Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997.

<sup>13</sup> André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism', in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver/Helen R. Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1972, p. 125.



Yet, despite its appealingly contrarian and reductive nature, this exercise exhibits a false objectivity, since it is by subjective judgement—influenced by taste—that the positions on the map are obtained. While some elements of visual thinking are opening to systematic objectification through the reverse engineering of human visual systems in computing, the automatic classification and ordering of art works, as much a social as a perceptual matter, remains a distant prospect.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the potential clash between computational systems that encapsulate aspects of human cultural processing and the resistant art object raises a number of issues about *Fig.* In writing this essay, I have been looking at the images in digital form, as a PDF of the book layout, and as jpegs. In its gallery display, *Fig.* contained a number of archaic elements: against the characteristic inflation in size of art prints, 4x5 inch negatives were used to make contact prints, just as the earliest photographers had done, laying their negatives directly on the paper. It was a practice also insisted upon by the stern formalists of f64. These small, highly detailed prints, fetishes of precision and miniaturization, warranted careful examination, nose to glass, and preferably magnifying glass to eye (another Victorian habit). Housed in white box frames, they elicited once more both the deep settling of early photographs in protective materials (Benjamin noted that daguerreotypes were often housed in cases like jewelry), and the white mounts of modernist pictures.<sup>15</sup> The older association takes us to the now familiar ground of

<sup>14</sup> For an account of the objective description of pictures, see John Willats, *Art and Representation: New Principles in the Analysis of Pictures*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 508; 'Group F.64 Manifesto', 1932 (displayed at the De Young Museum),

conquest through vision, of classification, control and Empire; the modernist one to the ambition to create through subjective art a total visual knowledge in which nothing would escape delineation in carefully graduated shades of grey (this last at least acknowledged, if it did not resolve, the tight interweaving of objective and subjective in the photograph). The little booklet that accompanied the exhibition, which gave the titles of each work and the textual description that you have in this book, had viewers moving from close inspection of print to page to print, shuttling between image and text, in another revival of an older practice of looking. So the undermining of imperial manners of thinking was accompanied by the unfamiliar reenactment of some of its habits of viewing.



*Naema Erasmus*

Two developments make these old practices, and their associated classification systems, appear definitively antique. Chaos no longer holds the terrors it once did for those who would map and control. Rather it is harnessed to predict the movements of complex systems from markets to the weather, and its visual form (the fractal) is used in the most popular image compression standard, the jpeg. In addition, the tying of collective labour to the database in image banks such as Flickr, rather than imposing a singular data structure on the objects it contains, has a free-form structure in which users classify objects under many different headings. One Broomberg and Chanarin picture appears there, the photograph of Naema Erasmus from *Mr. Mikheze's Portrait*, with the following tags:

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reprinted in Therese Thau Heyman, ed., *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography*, The Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA 1993, p. 53.



It is not that these classifications are particularly surprising, or that they could not be turned to nefarious purposes, but rather that the principle of organisation is open to intervention and multiple meanings. While they reflect the interests of the person who first posted the image, they may be added to by anyone. The general circulation of the images from *Fig.* is much more controlled, whether in the fixed form of a sequence of pictures on a gallery wall or in the stitched or glued pages of a book. It is not, either, that collective and multiple forms of classification can be seen as an automatic panacea to the ills of top-down, authoritative and singular classifications, any more than is the retreat into subjectivism. Yet it does at least make visible the power struggle over depiction and labelling.

The physical object, which can only be in one place at once and is usually owned by a single person or institution, tends to be subject to authoritarian systems of control and classification. The reproducible image and, even more so, the virtual 'object' know no such limits. Broomberg and Chanarin have in the past been unusual among those photographers who have an interest in gallery display in that they have not editioned their work. They have denied themselves that arbitrary legal assignation of a number to a print

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<sup>16</sup> As accessed in July 2007.

series, made to comfort the collector of reproducible media. To the extent that Broomberg and Chanarin move towards the fixed art object, as exemplified in the precious, unique or limited edition print in a custom-built frame, this comes into tension with both their own undermining of unitary classification systems and the art world ambition (much stated and rarely realised) to produce infinite and multiple readings. They do display images from *Fig.* (and their other projects) on their own website, though at low resolution.<sup>17</sup> (In general, the power of copyright and the control of images on the Web can be easily be glimpsed in the contrast between searching a set of images using Google's 'all images sizes' category and then doing the same with 'large images': for Broomberg and Chanarin the searches produce respectively nearly 600 and 14 images—the latter mostly covers of *Colours* magazine.)<sup>18</sup> Perhaps as a complement to the display of the miniature prints, they should release the high-resolution digital files of *Fig.* online, where they can be freely copied and gathered under many various and competing forms of classification, enacting as well as illustrating the subversion of the old but revived order.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.choppedliver.info/flash.html>

<sup>18</sup> As accessed in July 2007.