

## Interview with Artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

This is the full length version of the interview with artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin linked to the Broomberg & Chanarin Learning Guide for Key Stages 3 – 5 inspired by the artists' film *The Bureaucracy of Angels* (2017), an Art on the Underground commission for King's Cross Station.

For more information and for the learning guide visit: <https://art.tfl.gov.uk/projects/the-bureaucracy-of-angels>

### **Tell me about how you met, your shared history and how it has affected your work.**

*Olly:* We're both South African in origin, to different degrees. I left South Africa when I was seven and Adam left when he was 21. We are both of Eastern European Jewish origins and our families were friends who knew each other well, and in fact, we discovered quite late in working together that we were related to each other. So we're cousins. We met in South Africa in a place called Wupperthal which is a little tiny Mission town, not even a town, a kind of settlement in the Cederbergs, which is in the Cape area. And then when Adam moved to London to study at Central Saint Martins we became very close friends and lived together, and then later we began work at Benetton *COLORS* Magazine, we were editing the magazine. And it was only after leaving the magazine that we became photographers and started making our own pictures and working editorially together and also commercially. And it's been a long, long road together and there's been lots of different phases but we've always had a shared practice.

*Adam:* I just think the element of us sharing what we've called the 'puddle of a gene pool' is a kind of heritage. On the boat back from Libya where we were rescuing the refugees heading back to Sicily, it really occurred to me very strongly that in close to about 80 years prior to that our grandparents were taking the boat in exactly the opposite direction from Europe to Africa, in search of safety from the Pogroms. And it just struck me as very ironic, and it expanded the biography of this idea of migration away from the crisis that seems to be happening in the last few years to this thing that happens over hundreds of years and it's written into our DNA to move around, in search of safety.

*Olly:* That is a really good point and a few years ago Adam and I went to South Africa where we interviewed a lot of our grandparents' generation about their experience of arriving in South Africa. And many of them were coming from complete destitution in Eastern Europe in Poland, Russia and Lithuania, and they arrived in South Africa at a time when there was an advantage in being white. It was during the apartheid regime. And they found themselves instantly elevated from being at the bottom of the social ladder to above the blacks, above the Indians. They were still immigrants but they slotted in at a high level and that suited them very well. And so this history – as Adam said really beautifully – this history of migration is built into our psyche. And it's a part of the way that we see the world around us, in the present.

### **Tell me about how you work together as a duo.**

*Olly:* Well, Adam is living in Berlin at the moment, since September, so it's changed quite a lot, very recently. But we've been working together for 20 years and I'd say the key to the way that we make work is through conversation and through discussion. And so there's always this kind of ongoing, never-ending conversation that begins with one project and continues through other projects. And it's not always pleasant conversations, its arguments as well. So there's quite a lot of friction in terms of the production of the work. We argue. We fight. We discuss and we try to refine our ideas together and I think it's that process that actually leads us to quite a strong position with each project; that kind of debate.

*Adam:* I'd say there's two key words that I would identify as fundamental to our practice which are slightly uncanny and not very disciplined. One of them is 'coincidence' and the other is a communication or a 'lack of ownership' where we've always said when we were taking pictures that we would at some point forget who actually pushed the shutter. And the fact is that that ran contrary to the whole idea of what a photographer is. And so neither of us actually owned the

image neither like in a juridical sense nor a creative sense. And it was never important to us, and I think in the film we had a director of photography who was consistent but certain different shoots were directed by Olly and me alternatively. We were never at the same place at the same time but that's of no importance because in a way we've developed an almost sixth sense about how to image something, a level of distance or an aesthetic judgement. So that the puzzle fits together in this odd way. And I think also this idea of coincidence is really interesting and maybe another word is curiosity, and I think Olly suffers acutely from it which is an absolute blessing. I mean you can't walk down a corridor with Olly without him opening every single door. And when that's in a maximum security prison it's disconcerting. But what's amazing is that these things we stumble upon, these occasions, they are a mix of coincidence but I think the key thing is this collaboration which is a lack of ownership.

*Olly:* I think the other word is that there's an 'anonymity' to the work because the two of us are making this work together because we – as Adam so rightly put it – we don't really apply authorship to it or individual authorship. There's this freedom, in a way it's quite liberating and allows us to go off on journeys that explore aesthetics and use different aesthetic strategies so that we don't feel compelled to make work that looks the same. We're both pulling in two different directions all the time and I think one of the things that we've probably suffered from over the years is that our work is impossible to pin down and say, "well those guys do this then they do that". We kind of do anything. And we always borrow whatever aesthetic we need for the project.

And so, for example in the film for this project the use of animation is something that we've never used before but it felt like a necessary ingredient. And so we kind of embrace that. And I think that's because there's two of us and this openness and this lack of authorship, or the authorship is quite difficult to pin down, I think that allows for a kind of freedom. And so our projects tend to start in one place and end somewhere else. We're always disappointed if the thing we set out for is what we end up with. That always feels like a kind of failure in a way. And this film is a great example of that because it's taken two years to do. It's gone down many, many dead alleys and cul-de-sacs and reverses and fast forwards. And I think where we've ended up is a complete surprise to both of us.

### **Tell me about the importance of film and photography in your work.**

*Adam:* I think what was very interesting about going on the boat, essentially a giant floating ambulance that heads from Malta to Libya that takes 24 hours, and it bobs about until these dinghies full of up to 200 refugees are spotted, and then they fill up the boat and travel back for 48 hours to Italy. What was striking was that it had only hosted photojournalists or journalists from television before, say Sky News or BBC, and that moment of crisis had been imaged in a very specific way, which was to highlight the human drama and even the camera motion was quite erratic, because it followed the action. It was very much about transmitting information and our brief to the director of photography, essentially our vision, was for the camera to almost dissipate all of the laws of journalism which was if the camera was looking at somebody and a person or an action was happening somewhere else the camera needn't follow the action. It was just to carry on looking at the person we were looking at, or if the action passed by the camera it would remain steady, which made it a kind of cruel observer because it's not necessarily a very empathetic thing. But at the same time I think if you compare some of the clips from that boat filmed by Sky News to what we have done, ours is much calmer, sedated, and a version of that series of events which is actually how it is. The drama only happens in a matter of seconds and the rest of it is the 72 hours of bobbing around on the ocean waiting, either with an empty boat or with four or five hundred people on it.

*Olly:* I think we have found generally over the years working in quite fraught environments, often on the borders of conflict zones and in very photogenic sorts of spaces, that there is – as Adam said – a lot of empty time, there's a lot of waiting, there's a lot of boredom actually and there's very little drama in these environments. And just to approach your question from a more general perspective, just in terms of our practice about photography, our history is that we started photographing or working as documentarians in quite a traditional way working with a large format camera, making photographs that were mostly portraits, environmental portraits, that tended to

recall the language of colonial photography in a way. They suggested the idea of classification of otherness. But we always try to undo that by talking to our subjects and always having the name of the person, and trying to make it a more equal process. Because one of the things that bothered us about making those kind of photographs was what we often refer to as this 'unequal flow of power' from the photographer to the subject. And that always felt quite unfair and we always felt bothered by it and wanted to rectify that. And we worked in this documentary mode for a number of years and produced a book called *Ghetto* (2003).

But these kinds of things that were bothering us about the process were impossible to ignore. And our work started to move towards a more conceptual approach where we were thinking not just about taking photographs of things happening in the world, but of our role as a witness in those places and what it meant to have the privilege of being there. And what it meant to be an outsider looking in, and the politics of that, and the problematics of that. And also thinking about the technology of photography, and with an awareness that photography, or the technology and history of photography itself, is not neutral ideologically, and that it comes with a whole lot of ideology and politics. And there's a lot of complexity there as well, and in terms of race, and in terms of otherness. And so our work developed from this place of being quite a traditional documentary mode to something that was more discursive and more reflective about the medium of photography. And so the fact that we're two people making the pictures helps because there's less fetishisation of the moment of clicking that shutter which is something that photography is obsessed about. Because the moment of taking the picture is slowed down to this conversation and stretched out, time stretches and it becomes less about capturing a moment and more about thinking about what it means to be there, and also what's happening outside of the picture.

*Adam:* I think just to add to that – that's really well put – it's the inherent contradiction that there's this battle between what is truth and what is the document in a juridical sense, or what's fictional. And I think, the fact that we have chosen this kind of JCB crusher as the protagonist and not the migrants, for instance, is testimony to that. Obviously it's so fictionalised that it gives you an access point and I think we've done that many, many times. In a piece of work called *Rudiments* (2015) where we spent a week with young recruits in Liverpool, we also inserted a character called the 'bouffon' [*a dark clown*]. Or when we spent time with the Ministry of Defense on the frontline in Afghanistan, we had literally a box of photographic paper which functioned much in the same way, in a performative way. This strange being that doesn't belong on the frontline of a war, it doesn't belong in a giant floating ambulance on the coast of Libya. In hindsight I think the way that we use photography is to play with power and to watch what that power or bureaucracy expects – like Olly said – as there's such a long history between photography as a technology and power. It was traditionally, and many argue it still is, used that power to control, to classify. And if you look at who controls surveillance right now, it's governments, it's the states, and it's very difficult to fight back. And I think that what we've constantly tried to do is just alert people through these performances/works, how photography actually colludes with power, unwittingly, even if you don't want it to.

*Olly:* That's lovely. And it makes me think about Brecht. Bertolt Brecht is a character that we've been very curious about, his concept of alienation. Now that I'm thinking about it, in a way we use a camera as a kind of alienating device rather than as a recording device, in that the presence of the camera changes. And when I say camera, I mean it very broadly. So in the film that we've made, the digger is like a witness. When I say camera, I mean witness actually. So in this story, in terms of the box Adam talked about in Afghanistan, the box was a witness. It was recording these traces of light on the frontline. And the bouffon in the cadet camp was a witness in a way, a witness to the structure, the hierarchy of how the military is constructed, and this is not just a witness it's a kind of critique of it. And in our new film, the digger acts as a witness. He, or she actually, is there watching as the refugees are saved and doesn't participate, and doesn't actually show a lot of empathy either. She's quite disconcertingly removed; in that sense her presence is alienating. It refuses to allow you to just empathise and it demands a level of critique.

**Tell me about your commission for Art on the Underground.**

*Olly:* So just mechanically, we've made a film which is 12 minutes long. It begins in a boat yard,

actually a graveyard for boats in Sicily. And what's happened is over the last decade these big old fishing vessels have arrived on the coast of Sicily from North Africa, Libya, Algeria and other places. And these boats are handmade wooden boats that are essentially fishing vessels that have been borrowed and used to carry migrants over. And the migrants come and are taken off the boats and they're either put into the asylum system and stay there or they're sent back home. The boats however never go back and they've been accumulating in a particular port in Sicily. There were so many of them that they were just running out of space, and for logistical and pragmatic reasons the Italian government decided that something had to be done, and it was decided that they should be demolished.

So Adam and I spent about a year trying to get access to this store of boats. And eventually we got permission to document the demolition of a hundred boats. But it was deemed to take 40 days, which is a kind of biblical number. And what interested us about the boats is that they weren't just boats but they were imbued with a sense of culture, and it suggested that there wasn't just people coming from Africa to Europe but they were coming with culture. And these boats are hand-painted with all sorts of iconography like the evil eye, other diagrams and drawings, some of them religious. All of the boats have names in Arabic. Very often they refer to famous preachers and readers of the Quran. And these boats when we looked at them, we were really struck by how beautiful they were and really if you think about the history of artifacts coming from Africa to Europe and being put into museums it felt that these boats were as beautiful as any 'fang mask' the kind of mask that sits in The Met [*The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York*] or the British Museum. And it felt like a real tragedy that they were being demolished. So primarily we just wanted to record that demolition and the destruction of these objects of culture.

And the way we work is we start with one thing and one thing leads to another. And it felt very intuitively right that we should then go out onto the surface of the water and start to observe these boats arriving. And so Adam went on the MOAS [*Migrant Offshore Aid Station*] boat – I didn't go – and he observed and filmed, documenting several rescues taking place. And what we were interested in really is thinking about the ocean, the Mediterranean as a liquid surface. The Mediterranean conjures up all sorts of different conflicting images in our minds. You've got an image of the Mediterranean as somewhere that you go on holiday. It's a kind of playground. It's a fun place and you dive into the water, and it feels good on your skin and it's something joyful. But the Mediterranean is also a war zone and it's a place of suffering and it's a place imbued with a lot of fear and a lot of danger. And so we were interested in this juxtaposition. We were also interested in the idea of surveillance and this body of water is actually surveyed by lots of different state bodies. And there are gaps between those borders and there are areas of that ocean that are basically not observed, and there are places where people disappear and they fall off the edge of the surveillance map essentially. So thinking about the sea as both a sea of water but also a 'sea of data'. And data that's being accumulated all the time using satellite reading, it's being read all the time and is generating a sea of data, which is used to survey but also misses areas and there's a blindness there.

*Adam:* What was quite interesting is that a lot of people working for MOAS, but also the migrants we spoke to on the boat, referred to the sea as 'the desert' and it is a very strange metaphor. And as a lot of people were coming from sub-Saharan Africa, they had to literally traverse the Sahara Desert. And a lot of people die on the way up towards Libya. But the reason they refer to it as the desert is it's the only other place where a crime can happen without a witness, and they would describe seeing bodies along the roads who had either been killed, or robbed, or died of dehydration in the desert. And this idea of the sea as an area – by satellite of course it's absolutely surveyed – that's impossible to cover with a human eye. And in a way the NGOs [*Non-Governmental Organisations*] like MOAS serve two purposes. One is this, primarily to save the lives of people heading to certain death without them. But the other thing is to serve as a witness, and I think if there's any kind of empathy in our main protagonist, who's this digger, she is there as a witness. It's important just to note in history at this moment that this is what's happening. People are being sent out, each paying twelve hundred euros a pop, a hundred and eighty people in a rubber dinghy that can travel 5km which is meant to take two days and it can only travel for about four hours. That needs to be noted and written down and governments are not doing that. So that's

the kind of benevolent witness that she is if anything.

### **What was your experience of working with MOAS?**

*Olly:* MOAS was a vehicle for us in a way. And although we gave some of the material we shot to MOAS to use for campaigning we were not there to make a film for MOAS or even represent MOAS. And I think you can have an NGO hat on or you can have an artist hat on and they usually don't both fit.

*Adam:* But it's important to note that MOAS invited us as artists to accompany that trip and not as journalists or as documentarians. It was very interesting because the debate that happened on the boat with the crew is a debate that Olly and I are really familiar with. It was something that we encountered say in Iraq, or in Afghanistan talking to the military, where we had to pretend we were journalists in order to get imbedded because the military were more afraid of the role of the artist, who is a renegade, who is not beholden to the laws of the contracts between journalism and the military. I just think the debate that happened on that boat felt very familiar to me and it's something Olly and I've experienced time and time again. When dealing with institutions, no matter how benevolent their remit is, they function within parameters and they struggle to see the complexities of things, and how images are slippery, it's very hard to control them, and it can backfire on a corporate. And I think that this is something that's integral to our work but it's not something that a military organisation or a rescue operation would necessarily be thinking about, although I think it's pivotal.

### **Why did you choose to contrast the violent destruction of the boats alongside the peaceful footage of the rescued refugees?**

*Olly:* We haven't spoken about the role of the state and why we've chosen the digger as the protagonist. It was obvious in a film about refugees that the protagonist is usually the refugee and the purpose is to either empathise with the refugee, or be repelled by the refugee, or have fear towards the refugee as a protagonist in the story of migration, but we chose instead for the digger to be the protagonist. And the reason for that is that the digger is 'the machinery of the state'. I mean in a totally literal sense, it is a machine, it belongs to the state and it's performing orders of the state. What we wanted to do is to shift the attention away from the normal knee-jerk, emotional interpretations of this kind of material that we've all seen on the news, all the time and we can process it so it's not actually that upsetting anymore. And we're all quite immune to it and that felt too easy, and so with the machine the focus shifts to the state. And it opens up questions about how we are dealing with the crisis. So it takes the emphasis away from the humanitarian crisis actually and tries to put the focus more on a governmental or political position, recognising that this is a political problem not necessarily humanitarian.

*Adam:* That's a great point, and I think also just to note what you're saying about this notion of alienation or this idea of disorientation. The idea of using a 70 year old Sicilian folk song and making the digger become the singer is really quite humorous. And it's kind of blasphemous to use humor in a situation like that but it's in order to break – what Olly's talking about – this knee-jerk instinct to either empathise or villainise. You need to be slightly disorientated, so it just catches you off guard. So you're not able to make the normal kind of rational thinking process depending on what your specific politics or fears are, and I think that's really important as well.

### **What do you feel are your responsibilities as artists?**

*Olly:* It is a complicated question because as a journalist you have an obligation to tell the truth.

*Adam:* Well not anymore!

*Olly:* Maybe journalists have become more like artists?

*Adam:* Starting with that point I said about the fact that the Ministry of Defense is more afraid of us as artists than journalists because journalism is so imbedded with capital right now, it depends on who's paying for the facts. That shapes the facts, and I think the fact that the history of art is one of critique – I'm speaking about 'one art world' – that it's not afraid of complexity and it's also not

afraid of humor. And I think those two things, it sounds a bit pretentious, but I think to never let go of this notion as every issue is highly complex and there's humor in everything. I mean within 15 minutes of people being rescued within inches of drowning in the middle of the Mediterranean with no land in sight, they were cracking up laughing!

*Olly:* But humor is very connected to fear. And we did a lot of research into the history of slapstick for the film *Rudiments* (2015). You know, what we were interested in – Adam was talking about humor – is when is it OK to laugh at somebody else's misfortune? And that's how slapstick is constructed. It's like a framework that you put around somebody else, somebody gets hurt. They get injured, they get killed, like a dinosaur falls on their head and it's funny. Ordinarily when somebody gets injured or hurt, you're expected to have empathy but with a slapstick framework you're allowed to laugh at it. So that's something that we're really curious about, is the relation between observing other people's pain and when you're allowed to laugh at that... I think Adam said it very well but just to clarify I think that the journalist's job is to clarify and to make clear, and to in a way simplify it. I see the job of the artist as to present the complexity and to embrace that. But I suppose it just depends, as there are so many different art worlds and so many different types of artists, and we subscribe to a very particular kind, and we have very specific strategies.

*Adam:* I don't think any of our work proposes or suggests solutions, it's more problematic for everybody. I haven't met one person I've shown this film to, although it's not finished yet, who hasn't had a problem with something about it, and that's OK. That's important as it asks enough questions for it to exist in the world. I think I have a problem with work that's just so conclusive and right on that there's no holes in it. I think something about me and Olly is that we're quite provocative... and I think that's also part of our role as provocateurs messing about with authority like a little kid would with a teacher, just testing the boundaries.

### **Why is this commission relevant to Londoners now?**

*Olly:* So first of all when we started this project we went on a tour of the London Underground network. We met a lot of different people and one of the interactions that I most clearly recall was meeting the controller of the whole network... And we had this interview with the controller and we asked him this question "what is a human being for you in the system?" And he explained, he gave quite a long and convoluted answer, but he said this is a system for moving people around the city and it's quite complicated when people are gathering on the station waiting to get on the train. There's a limited number of spaces for people when the train arrives and the doors open. There's got to be enough room for people to get out and for new people to get in. And if the train is late the number of people on the platform accumulates and it becomes even more difficult, and it slows down the process of people getting out and people getting in, and that then slows it down for the next station. And literally within 20 minutes the whole system can easily grind to a halt, if it isn't run like clockwork.

So one of the very high pressure jobs is for the train driver to get the doors open and the doors closed, and to move on without any delay. So he talked about the system which is really designed for moving people around. And he spoke about his goal for the person was to come into the underground system and to leave it and for them to have had an unmemorable experience. And that phrase really struck me, what does it mean to have an 'unmemorable experience'? It means that there is no interruption that you flow through the system without any friction. And when we were asked to make a piece of art for the London Underground that idea felt in contrast to the idea of a piece of public art, because a piece of public art is designed to stop you, to arrest you, to engage you, and you're trying to put this thing, this object, into a place that is designed for people to move frictionlessly through and out of. So the whole concept of Art and the Underground is in a way flawed.

And so we really struggled to think about what it was that we wanted to place into this environment. And it felt, in a very simplistic way, that the idea of a journey seemed interesting to us. The idea that people are entering a system and they are journeying through it and then out of it. And the idea of this other kind of journey, this journey that is full of friction, is full of danger, is full of risk and setbacks, we wanted to contrast these two journeys; the journey of the migrant trying to reach

Europe and the journey of the commuter on their way to work. On a really simple level we wanted to offer that contradiction.

*Adam:* I wonder what you have in your mind when you say London. Why is this important to London? Because for me, it's obviously one of the most multicultural places on the planet and there's somebody from every country of the 15 countries that were on that boat from Libya living in London, functioning and contributing to that society. I think the world's problems are London's problems because London is part of the world... It's like these are things we've just got to think about as human beings, and I think Olly and I are a bit expedient. We just take every forum we're offered to talk about things that we feel are very important to us. So I think just as a human being, not necessarily even as a Londoner, it's important to think about this particular migration...

Really briefly I just want to reiterate that point of using the Cantastoria [*singing storyteller*] as expanding the biography of this idea of what's being called so often this current "crisis of migration", which has been used across Europe to create this nationalist right wing kind of populist response. And I think it's so interesting being in Berlin, a place which has such a process of this notion of migration for so long, for many years now. My point is to expand the timeline so it's not just yes we're currently facing this move towards Europe but we've seen moves away from Europe before, and I think that my final point is it's clear speaking to the migrants, that none of these issues are just about Syria. Climate change is probably one of the biggest causes of people moving up to sub-Saharan Africa. So the idea again – going back to Olly's point of this complexity – why is it important for London, because it talks about climate change. Forget about culture, forget about migration and forget about jobs. People are having to move because they can't grow food.

**Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your new film?**

*Olly:* The digger is violent but also tender, separating the boats, food, clothes, wood and metal. It's like an animal dissecting another animal... I think the thing about humor and slapstick is interesting and the presence of this digger is humorous. You know, she's singing, and the role of humor and the history of slapstick is important, as in our film *Rudiments* (2015). When is it OK to laugh at another person's misfortune? And what is the correct response?

*Adam:* The story that the Cantastoria is telling, is lamenting, is predominantly about the men who had to leave Sicily in various ways over the last two centuries to seek work, mainly in America. So it flips it on its head and it makes it a more universal story. It's not just about the present so-called crisis we're facing but the fact that Sicily as an island has experienced coming and going for two centuries. I think that's the crux, that's one of the crucial things about our film.

*This interview was conducted by Rachel Moss, Learning Guide Writer (Freelance post) for A New Direction.*