

Dora Fobert, 2011

Glass panels, 21.5×26.5 cm.

● Dora Fobert was born before the Second World War in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her family owned the famous Fobert Photo Studio. Dora assisted official ghetto photographer Jakub Boim before embarking on her own series of portraits of women in the ghetto. In August 1942, she was deported to Treblinka. Dora's friend, Adela K, a Holocaust survivor, brought these portraits to light.

During the Third Reich, Jewish women were characterised as bohemian, decadent and exotic, in direct contrast to the notion of the naturally beautiful Aryan women. It is thought that Dora Fobert's series of nudes were created as a form of visual resistance to the objectification of these women and the notion of the 'adorned Jewess'.

Because of the limited supply of photographic chemicals in the ghetto, Fobert's prints were never properly fixed and remain unstable under natural light. For this reason, they are displayed behind red glass.

The most important thing to know about Dora Fobert is that she never actually existed. The Polish academic Karolina Sulej created this backstory based on a real photographer's assistant and the artists then inhabited her persona to produce these works. This experiment in authorship was part of the Krakow Photo Festival curated by Broomberg & Chanarin in 2011.

Spirit is a Bone, 2013

HD video, 1 min.

Glass panels / C-type print, 40×50 cm.

Balaclavas.

● This series of portraits, which includes Pussy Riot member Yekaterina Samutsevic and many other Moscow citizens, were created by a machine, a facial recognition system developed in Moscow for public security and border control surveillance. The result is more akin to a digital life mask than a photograph: a three-dimensional facsimile of the face that can be easily rotated and closely scrutinised.

What is significant about this camera is that it is designed to make portraits without the co-operation of the subject: four lenses operate in unison to generate a full-frontal image of the face, ostensibly looking directly into the camera, even if the subjects themselves are unaware of being photographed. The system was designed for facial recognition purposes in crowded areas, such as subway and railway stations, stadiums, concert halls and other public areas but also for photographing people who would normally resist being photographed. Indeed, any subject encountering this type of camera is rendered passive, because no matter which direction he or she looks, the face is always rendered looking forward and stripped bare of shadows, make-up, disguises or even poise.

Co-opting this device, Broomberg & Chanarin have constructed their own taxonomy of portraits in contemporary Russia that rely heavily on the oeuvre of 20th-century German artists. August Sander produced over 300 portraits of archetypal German workers during the Weimar Republic—from the baker to the philosopher to the revolutionary. His project, to create a comprehensive archive of society, was conceptually and formally rigorous. His subjects are positioned centre frame. Always looking into the camera. Always heroic in relation to the lens. But the result, retrospectively viewed through the lens of the Second World War, becomes unexpectedly melancholic, even sinister.

As the only resistance against this technology is the balaclava, during the exhibition in Moscow, Broomberg & Chanarin invited members of the public to participate in a global campaign against state-sponsored surveillance. Recalling the tricotouse—groups of women who, as an act of protest, knitted scarves beside the gallows during the French Revolution—they asked participants to knit, crochet or sew a balaclava. Some of these are on display. If you would like to extend this gesture of resistance, you can send or bring your balaclava to Fabra i Coats: Contemporary Art Centre of Barcelona (carrer de Sant Adrià, 20, 08030 Barcelona).

Ghetto, 2003

Portraits on DM and framed, variable dimensions.
Documents in vitrines.

● *Ghetto* is a journey through 12 contemporary ghettos, like the Lukole refugee camp in Tanzania, the Leisure World Gated Retirement Community in USA, Star City, home of the Russian Space programme, Pollsmoor, a maximum-security prison in South Africa or the René Vallejo Psychiatric Hospital in Cuba. In each of these places, Broomberg & Chanarin, as editors and photographers of *COLORS* magazine, methodically documented their inhabitants, and asked them the same questions: How did you get here? Who is in power? Where do you go to be alone? To make love? To get your teeth fixed? For many of those photographed, it was their first time in front of a camera.

About the series of self-portraits made in Cuba, the artists said: “Most of the patients were heavily medicated and for many of them it was their first time in front of a camera. We were concerned with the morality of photographing so-called madmen. Would they understand the cultural, political and economic consequences of these images? In the end, we decided to devise a system whereby patients could photograph themselves. By squeezing the ball on the end of a long release cable they could take their photograph when and how they chose. Some looked into it with a hard, penetrating gaze. Others obeyed the ritual of photography with smiles. And one man, called Mario, turned his back on the camera and waited for the shutter to click.”

Yasser Arafat, 2004

C-type contact print, 25×30 cm.

● Broomberg & Chanarin describe this image as a pivotal moment in their practice. During an assignment in Ramallah, Palestine, they visited the then leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, in his heavily guarded compound, just weeks before his death. Having taken this portrait, they returned to the airport where the Israeli airport security intentionally X-rayed the film multiple times in an effort to damage the negative. The green band that runs across Arafat’s chest is a trace of their efforts. Initially, they tried to repair the image by digitally removing the shadow, later they understood that the damage was in fact more interesting than the image itself. It attested not only to the inherent instability of images, the possibility of multiple authors and multiple readings but also to the power of the image and of the human wish to destroy it.

Caesars Palace Casino, South Africa, 2004

C-type print on aluminium, 87×110 cm.

● For the majority of the 27 years that Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, his image was banned —very few people knew what he looked like. In South Africa today, images of Mandela are everywhere: on pillowcases and wristwatches, on shebeen decorations and as commemorative statues. Mandela’s image is so powerful that it is once again being policed by the state: reproduction requires permission from the Ministry of Trade and Industry. This half-dressed model of Mandela stood in a small museum devoted to the apartheid era, in Caesars Palace Casino just outside Johannesburg. It was part of a series entitled *Mr. Mkhize*, which due to space constraints in their studio, the artists destroyed entirely except for this image.

Trust, 2000

Book and prints.

● *Trust* is a series of photographic portraits taken in the last two years of the twentieth century. “There is a brutality about this set of portraits which itself discusses photography’s pervasive role as observer in our modern world, coupled with a sense of amazement about the willingness of their subjects, in their most vulnerable and sometimes abject moments, to surrender themselves to the photographer’s gaze”, writes Val Williams in the book’s introduction. She adds “its centre may well be the notion of the documentarist’s ‘real’, but beyond that, it is an exploration of the ways in which photographer and subject confront each other, the ways in which the real is confirmed by the imagined, the eventfulness of non-event.”

Portrait of Hutu and Tutsi, 2000

Acrylic paint on board.

● In August 2000, Broomberg & Chanarin commissioned Lenin, a sign painter living in a refugee camp on the border of Rwanda, to paint portraits of a Hutu and a Tutsi —the two ethnic groups from that region. At that time, the camp was home to 120,000 Hutu refugees who had fled the genocide in 1994. These portraits depict the contrasting ethnic stereotypes of the two groups and allude to the role that representation played in the devastating Rwandan genocide. This is the uncomfortable part that image-making plays in propagating human suffering.