

## The Politics of Appropriation

Lewis Bush, 2013

In 2013 the Deutsche Börse prize for photography was won by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, with *War Primer 2*, a reworking of the 1998 English edition of Bertolt Brecht's 1955 book *Kriegsfibel*.

In *Kriegsfibel*, Brecht – who viewed photography as something which often helped to entrench inequalities as much as expose them – sought to tease out the hidden meanings of Second World War press photographs. To do this he juxtaposed photographs clipped from newspapers against short quatrains

echoing the funerary poetry inscribed on the monuments of the ancient world, epigrams which sought to say what could not be seen. His poems variously reveal, confuse, and meditate on the images they are attached to, resulting in a work that explores the production and use of photographs of conflict on many levels, and with a rare sophistication.

In *War Primer 2* Broomberg and Chanarin updated the original book with images from the War on Terror (in a broad sense of that ambiguous phrase). Each new

photograph was selected to resonate with Brecht's original texts, printed and then physically stuck into one hundred copies of the English edition of *Kriegsfibel*.

To each copy Broomberg and Chanarin also added a small amount of screen printed red text over the existing titles and notes. The result was published in a limited edition of one hundred books, each initially selling for around ten times the market value of the unaltered books, which the artists had reportedly procured for nothing from the defunct publishers Libris. Rapidly selling out, signed copies of *War Primer 2* now appear for sale at closer to one hundred times the price of Brecht's original.

For many observers there was a certain sense of dismay at the duo's win. The Deutsche Börse prize shortlist, usually typified by conservatism, had for once been so interesting, divided as it was between photographers and artists in radically different camps. There was Christina de Middel, who represented the burgeoning, quirky, do-it-yourself photography book publishing scene. There was Chris Killip, part of the old guard of socially concerned documentary photography, his work given renewed significance by the campaign of austerity that was then taking place in the United Kingdom. There was Miskha Henner, fusing Duchamp-ian appropriation with a critique of the implications of massive automatic image production.

And then there were Broomberg and Chanarin, who more than any of the others perhaps represent the photographic arts establishment, the world of expensive editioned prints in white walled galleries. Their win, many felt, was once again a case of the gallery world choosing its own.

There was a little outrage at the result, as there always is with such prizes. There were rumours that the duo might be sued by the Associated Press for using a photograph in the book without permission. There were similarly vague suggestions of impropriety because of Adam Broomberg's former position as a trustee of The Photographer's Gallery, who organise the competition, and the

then current trusteeship of Michael Mack, publisher of *War Primer 2*. But most of all there was just a sense of indifference, apathy at a prize which was widely felt to have had once again chosen the most obvious candidates as winners.

This apathy was a pity, not least because it meant that many observers quickly disengaged. In the days after the prize result was announced those still commenting on the work were split broadly into two camps. Those who were unquestioningly enamored with *War Primer 2* (or for that matter with its makers), and those who on principle despised Broomberg and Chanarin and all that they represented. People who

preferred to condemn a work of theirs, simply because it was theirs, than admit that there was anything of value in it.

I found myself situated somewhere between the two camps, believing that with *War Primer 2* I was encountering a book which was on some levels extremely clever, and on other levels unresolved.

Appropriation in art is an established and more or less accepted technique, its validity asserted by a string of artists from Duchamp to the Chapman brothers. Its position in photography is less comfortable, perhaps because the inherent, infinite reproducibility of the medium means any appropriation is

always a potential threat to the original author's ownership of the work. Still in this field also it has been a popular tactic for many years, and *War Primer 2* is the latest in a long line of appropriative 'photographic' works, including of course Brecht's original *Kriegsfieber* which appropriates photographs directly from newspapers.

However appropriation becomes far more of an issue with Broomberg and Chanarin's reworked version, because where Brecht solely appropriated the physical material of the photographs he used, *War Primer 2* appropriates more totally, borrowing from Brecht on three levels; the physical, the conceptual, and

the ideological. In my view each of these appropriations bring with it its own set of problems.

Physically, *War Primer 2* builds directly on Brecht's original book, or 'inhabits' it to use Broomberg and Chanarin's chosen terminology, in the sense that the new photographs are physically stuck in to the books and overlay the old ones. The connections between Brecht's images and Broomberg and Chanarin's are hit and miss. Some are starkly brilliant. Plate 23 for example shows a photograph of the burning World Trade Centre seconds before it is hit by a second hijacked airliner. This image is overlaid on to an aerial reconnaissance photograph of a

recently bombed oil refinery, the smoke from the former connecting unbroken to that of the latter. The new image likewise matches almost seamlessly with Brecht's eerily prescient quatrain:

*A cloud of smoke told us 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.*

Other combinations are inevitably weaker and more problem fraught. The visual comparisons of George W. Bush and his deputies with Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering and Joseph Goebbels for example are lazy, and even slightly dangerous. As indeed is the idea of updating a book

about the Second World War to talk about the War on Terror, with its underlying assumption that these two conflicts are broadly comparable. Other additions problematically rely heavily on knowledge of the original image beneath, often now entirely obscured by Broomberg and Chanarin's new photographs.

Arguably this physical 'inhabiting' of Brecht's book (some might even call it squatting) is also troublesome in that it is a technique which adds little to the meaning of the work, but inherently limits its reproducibility. In doing so it forces a book intended to be mass producible and widely accessible into the world of the inaccessible limited art edition. What

was meant to be for the masses becomes a collectible object for the chosen few, and in doing so *War Primer 2* flies in the face of Brecht's invocation that the disempowered should 'reach for the book, it is a weapon.'

Conceptually speaking, *War Primer 2* is an almost total appropriation of *Kriegsfibel*. While Broomberg and Chanarin have added new visual material, with results that ranged from the provocative to the banal, the core of the book remains indisputably Brecht's. What, I would suggest, is interesting about *Kriegsfibel* was never the photography. What made and makes the book a masterpiece are the poems, those brilliantly simple but

insightful litanies to the stupid, cruel, arbitrariness of war and the reductive, complacent ways it is often documented. This I believe poses a difficult challenge to the notion that Broomberg and Chanarin met the Deutsche Börse prize's qualification that winner should have made a 'significant contribution to the medium of photography'. The contribution to photography remains entirely Brecht's.

Lastly, ideologically there is again an awkwardness in it all. Broomberg and Chanarin have selectively appropriated elements of Brecht's politics, not least his deeply held pacifism and his (now very fashionable) scepticism about the power of photography. And yet as

already observed, *War Primer 2* is not a book one suspects Brecht would have recognised as his own. It is an expensive, exclusive, limited edition art object. Not just that, but also an art object manufactured by unwaged, uncredited interns recruited to stick photographs into those one hundred books. Finally, one has to wonder how Broomberg and Chanarin can reconcile Brecht's politics with winning a prize sponsored by Deutsche Börse, a financial sector company which so represents the type of capitalism Brecht despised and routinely denounced.

With these thoughts in mind, and with Brecht's call not to 'start with the good

old things but the bad new ones' ringing in my ears I decided to respond. I appropriated Broomberg and Chanarin's appropriation, and began to digitally add new material. I replaced Brecht's original epigrams with small snippets of the text of his poem *A Worker Reads History*, a meditation on the countless forgotten of the past, they who built monuments and conquered continents in the names of kings and emperors. While doing this I reordered the pages of the book so that the existing images would more adequately match the flow of Brecht's poem. Working from this new structure, I added new images over the top of those selected by Broomberg and Chanarin and Brecht, choosing ones that

as far as possible resonated with the text of the poetry and visually connected to the photographs that lay beneath. Finally I overlaid Broomberg and Chanarin's screen printed text with a new layer of text of my own, printed in blue.

The resulting book, *War Primer 3: Work Primer*, is intended to be a photo-poetic primer on dangerous economics and inequitable labour relations, of the past and present, at home and abroad. It is a small tribute to the forgotten, the unacknowledged and unpaid who keep the engines of the world, indeed even the fine art world, turning.

## Extracts from *Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties*

### Bertolt Brecht, 1935

In 1935 Bertolt Brecht was living in Svendborg, Denmark having left Germany two years previously following the Nazi party's rise to political power.

Despite his status as an exile this proved a productive year. Alongside other activities Brecht traveled to the United States for the first time to see the production of his play *The Mother* at New York's Theatre Union, a trip which would pave the way for his later period of exile in America, as the German army rampaged across Europe.

As well as traveling Brecht found time to write two texts of significance to the making of *War Primer 3*. The first was his poem *A Worker Reads History* which forms the narrative backbone of this book. In the poem an imagined worker reading about the deeds of the past questions the lack of ordinary people in the historical record. The soldiers, workers and slaves who built pyramids and fought wars are conspicuous by their absence in history books that deal only with the names of great emperors and victorious kings.

The second text that Brecht finished in 1935 was the final version of *Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties* (the first version had been published in a shorter form the previous year). In this passionate essay Brecht ruminates on the difficulties faced by a writer seeking to speak truth to power. From the courage needed to recognise what truths are important, to the calculated cunning needed to conceal these ideas from censorship and put them in the hands of those most able to make use of them, Brecht makes a powerful and amusing case for writing as activism.

Despite being the product of a very particular time and place, and being very reflective of some of Brecht's more

dated ideological convictions, *Writing the Truth* remains a powerful rallying cry for politically conscious artists and writers who find themselves working under very different conditions today.

*'Writing the Truth Five Difficulties'*

*'Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the cunning to spread the truth among such persons. These are formidable problems for writers living under Fascism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or been exiled; they exist even for writers working in countries where civil liberty prevails.'*

*'1. The Courage to Write the Truth'*

*'It seems obvious that whoever writes should write the truth in the sense that he ought not to suppress or conceal truth or write something deliberately untrue. He ought not to cringe before the powerful, nor betray the weak. It is, of course, very hard not to cringe before the powerful, and it is highly advantageous to betray the weak. To displease the possessors means to become one of the dispossessed. To renounce payment for work may be the equivalent of giving up the work, and to decline fame when it is offered by the mighty may mean to decline it forever. This takes courage.'*

*'2. The Keenness to Recognize the Truth'*

*'...it is not untrue that chairs have seats and that rain falls downward. Many poets write truths of this sort. They are like a painter adorning the walls of a sinking ship with a still life. Our first difficulty does not trouble them and their consciences are clear. Those in power cannot corrupt them, but neither are they disturbed by the cries of the oppressed; they go on painting. The senselessness of their behavior engenders in them a "profound" pessimism which they sell at good prices; yet such pessimism would be more fitting in one who observes these masters and their sales ... They do not discover the truths that are worth writing about.'*

*'3. The Skill to Manipulate the Truth as a Weapon'*

*'Those who are against Fascism without being against capitalism, who lament over the barbarism that comes out of barbarism, are like people who wish to eat their veal without slaughtering the calf. They are willing to eat the calf, but they dislike the sight of blood. They are easily satisfied if the butcher washes his hands before weighing the meat. They are not against the property relations which engender barbarism; they are only against barbarism itself. They raise their voices against barbarism, and they do so in countries where precisely the same property relations prevail, but where the butchers wash their hands before weighing the meat.'*

*'4. The Judgment to Select Those in Whose Hands the Truth Will Be Effective'*

*'The century-old custom of trade in critical and descriptive writing and the fact that the writer has been relieved of concern for the destination of what he has written have caused him to labour under a false impression. He believes that his customer or employer, the middleman, passes on what he has written to everyone. The writer thinks: I have spoken and those who wish to hear will hear me. In reality he has spoken and those who are able to pay hear him ... But the truth cannot merely be written; it must be written for someone, someone who can do something with it.'*

*'5. The Cunning to Spread the Truth Among the Many'*

*'Many people, proud that they possess the courage necessary for the truth, happy that they have succeeded in finding it, perhaps fatigued by the labor necessary to put it into workable form and impatient that it should be grasped by those whose interests they are espousing, consider it superfluous to apply any special cunning in spreading the truth. For this reason they often sacrifice the whole effectiveness of their work. At all times cunning has been employed to spread the truth, whenever truth was suppressed or concealed'*  
*...*

*'The great truth of our time is that our continent is giving way to barbarism because private ownership of the means of production is being maintained by violence. Merely to recognize this truth is not sufficient, but should it not be recognized, no other truth of importance can be discovered. Of what use is it to write something courageous which shows that the condition into which we are falling is barbarous (which is true) if it is not clear why we are falling into this condition?*

*...*

*All these five difficulties must be overcome at one and the same time, for we cannot discover the truth about barbarous conditions without thinking*

*of those who suffer from them; cannot proceed unless we shake off every trace of cowardice; and when we seek to discern the true state of affairs in regard to those who are ready to use the knowledge we give them, we must also consider the necessity of offering them the truth in such a manner that it will be a weapon in their hands, and at the same time we must do it so cunningly that the enemy will not discover and hinder our offer of the truth.*

*That is what is required of a writer when he is asked to write the truth.'*

## Returning to the War Primer

Lewis Bush, 2015

In June 2013 I wrote *The Politics of Appropriation*, an essay which offered a solitary critique of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's widely lauded book *War Primer 2*.

In my essay I sought to question the duo's appropriation of Bertolt Brecht's theory, practice, and politics and their reuse of these things in a way which I felt was inconsistent with Brecht's work and ideas. Rather than being an inheritance of Brecht's legacy I suggested that *War Primer 2* was instead intended to make

a fashionable, saleable but ultimately toothless artistic statement.

My work as a 'critic' or writer has always been bound up with my work as a photographer, one informing the other in ways which are sometimes self-evident, and which at other times are complex and hard to fathom, even for me. Over time these two methods of engaging with a subject have become as inseparable as the two sides of a coin, and now I rarely approach a topic through one of them alone. For that reason, to emulate in

practice what I had already written about in theory (or put more simply, to practice what I preached) was a logical next step, and so I made *War Primer 3*.

Two years on from the initial publication of *War Primer 3* I have returned to rework and republish it, and a few people have rightly asked me why. It is a valid question. I know as well as any that an important part of working on creative projects is recognising when to move on from each one, when to judge that a work has reached completion or else has stalled, and to migrate on to new creative territory. It is important to resist the allure of returning to old projects, however great the temptation to relive

past victories and defeats. Interesting art is about movement, and nothing is decided in a state of rest. There were however four main reasons which seemed to me to justify a brief return, all tied to the larger goal of ensuring that *War Primer 3* had greater longevity.

Firstly and most practically this revision has been about improving the visual quality of the book and leaving it in a state better suited to future publication and display.

The original version of *War Primer 3* was made from low resolution photographs of *War Primer 2*. This was fine for my original purposes but limited the forms the work

could take. When finishing a project I often feel it is a good idea to leave it in a state that is as open ended as possible so that whoever finds it next might pick it up and be able to twist or turn it to many new purposes. *War Primer 3* was undermined in this respect by technical limitations that I wanted to resolve but could do nothing about at the time that I first made the book. Recently however I finally found myself in a position to borrow and re-photograph an original copy of *War Primer 2*, making it at last possible to start the process of recreating *War Primer 3* at a much higher quality.

Secondly and more importantly this revision has meant an opportunity to

clarify the book's message and the choice and employment of the imagery used to deliver it.

*War Primer 3* was originally made in a very reactive fashion, with images researched and collected and the book designed and distributed in less than a fortnight. This speed was quite critical at the time because the book was meant in part to be a timely response to the triumph of *War Primer 2* in the 2012 Deutsche Börse prize, and each passing day after the announcement of the prize results weakened the commentary the work had to offer. The speed of production was about more than newsworthiness however. It was also intended to be

demonstrative, to make the point that what Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin had done with *War Primer 2* was not artistically at all that profound, and could be replicated by anyone with some free time and an eye for a visual and textual contrast.

While speed seemed vital at the time it had obvious disadvantages, not least in that some of my original image choices were rushed and didn't echo the underlying spreads or adjoining text with the precision that I later wanted. As time has passed my awareness of these missed opportunities has grown more acute, and so part of the update has been to correct these. In some cases

this has meant the total replacement of an image, in others it has simply been a case of augmenting their positioning. As part of this revision of imagery I also decided to remove almost all of the historic photographs used in the first version of *War Primer 3*. The rationale behind this change was that the book was always meant to be primarily about current labour and economic relations and this intention was diluted by my use of images from the last century alongside those from the present.

The use of so many historic images was in part a throwback to an early draft of the book that made use only of photographs in the public domain. This proved impractical

in the final version. It remains for me the only great unresolved issue of *War Primer 3* that it appropriates so many photographs which are not in the public domain. Two wrongs do not make a right, and I recognise that this is something of a glaring contradiction in a work intended to critique the claiming of someone else's labour as your own.

Beyond these visible image changes I have made others that few people will notice but which still seemed to me to add more dimension to the work. In particular I have sought with this revision to connect images much more with the text of Brecht's original epigrams. While these epigrams are of course obscured

by new text in *War Primer 3*, I felt it was important to establish some sort of conversation with Brecht's original texts even if that dialogue remained largely invisible. I was also intrigued by the idea that a viewer's experience of *War Primer 3* would be quite different depending on their knowledge of the previous incarnations of the book.

For a reader approaching the *War Primer* series for the first time, spread forty-six of *War Primer 3* simply shows a man making a rude gesture towards an unseen audience while wearing a mask of the former Royal Bank of Scotland boss Fred Goodwin. Below is the inserted text 'Frederick the Great triumphed...'.  


Knowing the text of Brecht's original four line epigram (which accompanies a photograph of Adolf Hitler mid-speech) however changes the reading of this image quite dramatically, into one not so much of triumph but of defeat tinged with warning, a warning which I felt was pertinent to the 2008 financial crisis that Goodwin (popularly known as 'Fred the Shred') became one of the prime symbols of. Brecht's original text reads:

*That's how the world was going to be run!*

*The other nations mastered him, except*

*(in case you think the battle has been won)*

*The womb is fertile still from which that crept.*

The third reason for a revision was that

I wanted to more clearly re-establish an idea that was present at moments in Brecht's original *War Primer*. This is the idea that economic inequality and violent conflict are deeply entwined. Not only in the sense that one engenders the other through contests for essential resources and economic survival, but also in the sense that conflict is an intrinsic part of the way capitalism operates, not some aberration or by-product that emerges from it by chance.

In the original *War Primer* the idea that capitalism and conflict perpetuate each other is a clear motif almost from the start of the book. One of the earliest images depicts a group of workers moving vast

sheets of metal in one of the enormous Krupp steel plants that fed the German army throughout the Second World War. The epigram beneath reads:

*'Whats that you're making brothers?' 'Iron wagons'*  
*'And what about those great steel plates you're lifting?'*  
*'they're for the guns that blast the iron to pieces'*  
*'And what's it all for brothers?' 'It's our living'.*

Such was the role of the Krupp firm in the preparations for, and continuation of the Second World War that it's directors were amongst those put on trial at Nuremberg in 1945. The main defendant Alfred Krupp argued that he had only been interested in a favourable business environment and that 'we Krupps never

cared much about ideas'. Traces of the idea that conflict and profit making are linked activities remain in *War Primer 2* for those willing to look for them, whether by accident or design but the idea is notably diluted, and it seemed to me to be an important one to try and reintroduce.

The fourth and final reason for returning to *War Primer 3* was to eliminate most of the references to Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin.

Despite the limited time I gave to making it and the essentially uncreative nature of the book's concept, *War Primer 3* remains for me one of the more important

pieces of work I have made to date. As part of the revision I wanted to do all I could to ensure this would be a book and a political statement that still had some currency as Brecht's original does, when viewed sixty years or more after publication. Massive ideological conflicts like the Second World War might seem like ancient history, and even the sort of global asymmetric campaign of the War on Terror seems in some ways to belong to another era. However it seems likely we will see a growing number of smaller conflicts fueled by competition for resources rather than ideology as capitalism drains the world's resources dry and environmental degradation puts growing pressure on those that remain.

While feeling that this core idea of economic inequality and conflict would remain relevant I also felt that the book could never have the longevity I wanted it to have as long as it remained in large part a critique of two artists. Attacking the cul-de-sac that is the art world (and particularly the art photography world) is a fine way to gain easy plaudits from one's peers, but it is also a task akin to baiting a chained bear. It is riskless, pointless, and the act and tools by which it was achieved are quickly forgotten.

Similarly I have always felt that the act of criticism is a form of veiled compliment. Two years on from the original release of *War Primer 3* I feel that compliment

has been paid enough to Broomberg and Chanarin. For all of these reason I have removed all but two visual references to the artists from *War Primer 3*, and redirected much of the imagery and commentary back to the important issue of inequitable economics in the wider world. This book is the result. Whether the changes made to it are an improvement or a degradation will be for others to judge. Whether it proves to have the longevity I hope for it, only time will tell. But I can now feel that this project is complete, and I can set aside the *War Primer*.