OMAR KHOLEIF: What is it like for an artist to curate a project?

FIONA BANNER: There is a strange out-of-body experience when dealing with artworks that are not your own. But rather than curating, I think of it as presenting them in a different light.

OK: Because the lighting scheme you’ve chosen for the gallery is creating a sense of theatre?

FB: Yes, the works are presented in a kind of theatre. Which you could say is what an exhibition is anyway. This [display] is a very literal or overt kind of staging, here the works are performing or functioning in a room where the light is constantly changing, and the artworks are visible through changing colours and tones of light. It’s an art exhibition as theatrical performance. The viewer interacts with the works and the works interact with each other. The lighting scheme in the show runs through the CMYK sequence cyan, magenta, yellow, key [black] – the colours used in colour printing.

Sherrie Levine’s Kāñcer Tamo (2010) is a replica of a Buddhist sculpture from Cambodia – as a replica or stand in it’s acting a part, asking those questions about suspension of disbelief. Within this stage there are different moments; it’s all just playing with the act of looking.

The artwork is intimate but because the light in the gallery is constantly changing, time is visibly passing – the light is animating the works. There is a sense of changing conditions. From visible to barely visible.

I often think about works of art when they are asleep, boxed up, or just in the dark because the day is over – the lights are off, no eyes are there to activate the work. This is how works of art exist most of the time, inactive… So there’s a reference in the presentation to those half states.

I first encountered the works from this collection as printed images, and selected them from printed images. Any work of art is inextricably linked to its image or its photographic likeness, and primarily circulated, and understood or misunderstood, as a secondary image. In lighting this show, the most obvious choice of colours would be RGB: red, green, blue, which is the primary colour scheme associated with electronic displays. But I prioritised CMYK – the colour language of printing, because of its associations
with the photographic image and print reproduction.

OK: Can you unpack the term 'Stamp Out Photography', which you used as the title of the show? Is it a statement that emerged from your interest, or interests even, in representational photography?

FB: Well it's a polemic that I actually borrowed from the Archive of Modern Conflict, which is itself a photo-based archive in London. The first time I was there, a poster caught my eye, which was made on an old-fashioned block printing press reusing original blocks, it shows a Bollywood he-man standing on a camera. The words 'STAMP OUT PHOTOGRAPHIE' are printed below ('photographie' not 'photography' just to French it up a bit.)

I turned a photograph of that poster because it was funny. And a print of that photo has been up in my studio for a couple of years.

The Archive of Modern Conflict's main interest is photography, so that statement is an embrace and a denial of the medium, if you like. A fetishising of a medium. Also, it chimed with me because I am defined as a visual artist by my infatuation with but inability to accept the photographic and filmic, or indeed the - as in any - image.

OK: Can you talk a little more about your project with the Archive of Modern Conflict?

FB: The more I was there the less able I was to edit from what I found. There is such a vast amount of photographic material there.

It's huge, but I was looking for images from the here and now - or ones that spoke of our current conflicts. Conflict as something that exists elsewhere, geographically, demographically and often elsewhere in terms of history, is excessively well represented in the archive, but there was not much of the here and now.

In the end I commissioned and collaborated with a Magnum conflict photographer, Paolo Pellegrin, to photograph the City of London as a conflict zone, focusing on the financial industries.

I've always lived and worked on the edge of the City, but never understood it or been part of it physically, it's like another world culturally - so there was a voyeuristic element for me, spending a lot of time at the financial institutions etc.

I gave Paolo sections of text from Joseph Conrad's novela Heart of Darkness (1899), a tale of trade, greed and conflict - which is a text I keep coming back to, having initially encountered it at university through Apocalypse Now, in THE NAM (1997) years ago.

It chimed with the colonialist themes I had found in the archive; Paolo was also very immersed in a long-term project in the Congo at the time, and that also chimed with Heart of Darkness, a story told in London about the Belgian Congo.

OK: Are the images resulting from the collaboration going back into the archive?

FB: Yes, a selection of them did. Paolo shot 60,000 photographs, and I edited them. When you're looking at many images it is like looking at a moving image or film, and I did end up making a film from them. The process of editing entirely led to the form of the exhibition that resulted from this research residency. A selection of the photographs by Pellegrin presented in the exhibition Mystères Kuntz - He Has Dead were accessioned into the Archive of Modern Conflict, and filled under 'Heart of Darkness, 2014'.

OK: You seem to have gone into an editorial phase?

FB: Yes, my inability to edit has virtually become a position. For example, the publication All the World's Fighter Planes (2004/06) is what it says on the cover - all the planes. It's the same with a lot of the text works, THE NAM was described as being totally unedited, that is, the films described in their entirety from beginning to end. A hubristic statement, but you get the drift.

When I do edit, I edit down to absolutely nothing. For example, if I make up a text that's a text I will describe it as being completely unedited but then I might go the other way and completely edit the text and just be left with a full stop.

OK: You are exploring the mediation of the image, the way the context is manipulated by image producers. This ties in with the media of display you've been exploring in this project: the play on light and reveal.

FB: It's about shades of visibility, and the viewer's relationship with image. The presentation of the works. These words are usually seen in a very specific light; I don't know how long there has been the current convention in museum or gallery lighting. You know, to present a certain evenness and a particular level of lumens that has become the acknowledged way to view a work of art.

This presentation at the Whitechapel is the opposite. Sometimes the works are barely visible - then they are returned to relative brightness which is a nod to the alchemy of the darkroom, and also to the mechanics of opposites, of light and dark in a camera; the polemic of the camera. Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida (1986) says 'in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.' I always liked that statement.

OK: I feel like it's almost that the works become living things that are somehow telling you and telling you, look, here I am... they are revealing the full content that they are being subjected to.

It's as if they are revealing themselves and their multiplicity, in a way, through their display.

FB: One thing I always really enjoyed about writing an image, especially when I've been working in performative situations like a fast life-drawing room or a strip club, is that through text, through the act of writing, you can describe duration of time. You can describe the play of light. Since we've been sitting here it's gone from light outside to dark and that's something that is very hard to capture in a static image. There's a sense of the written image being somewhere between a static image and maybe a filmic image, but obviously it's an image that is de-saturated of light and colour... it's a static, duration image and that's something that this installation is playing with as well.

OK: And I think there's something in between life and art, between representation, and imaginary
Fiona Banner
Exhibition poster, Mistaq Kurnz - He Nox Deal, PFER, London 2014

Lithographic print on paper
84.1 x 59.4 cm
Photo: Paolo Pelligrin commissioned by Fiona Banner in collaboration with the Archive of Modern Conflict

Stamp Out

Photographie
Carteles La Candelaria Winnipeg

Archive of Modern Conflict
Stamp Out Photographie 2013
Block print on paper
manifestation, being suspended between multiple poles. Whether it is a temporal or spatial pole, there is a thing about wanting to play or suspending one’s expectation.

Yesterday I was at a museum, and what’s so interesting is you start to realise people’s perspectives – everyone’s reaching up to look at the work and ceaseless beyond the confines of the barrier and the barrier almost starts to become invisible. But actually what does it mean when you shift something as simple as a barrier?

FB: Looking at art is intrinsically voyeuristic, and in a really dumb way or really blatant way the barrier exaggerates that. It exaggerates the fact that this is an extremely rarefied object that you are so fascinated by that you just want to touch, to be part of the authenticity of this object, but you can’t. The architecture and manners, the entire ‘space’ of the museum does that.

OK: One thing that you play with in your work is scale. It’s a real thing. Imagery is everywhere – and the scale of images is much more variable today, isn’t it, so that they’re accessible on our phones in our pockets. We’re watching them on YouTube, on the way we work on the underground. I’m thinking particularly about images of conflict and violence. Something that you’ve always tried to negotiate with is scale. One is the size of the images that you present and the other is the physical, bodily relationship to those images.

FB: The humanisation of the camera, in the form of a mobile phone, which is a device associated with language and image at once, it’s an extension of the body – another hand – and the image conforms to that scale. The heroic image doesn’t exist; heroism of the image is now associated with immediacy. It’s also about fluidity, about the ease of replication of that imagery, isn’t it? We’re dealing with the evocative power of the screen, and in particular the live screen. Once the image is live, there is a tension between deferred time and real time, that’s the contentious space, particularly in conflict imagery.

OK: If we return to the images in the exhibition, what you’ve done with this particular project is to select works that, as you mentioned, are self-reflexive. But also there is that crossover and blur in terms of the formal mechanisms of what the images are trying to represent, particularly in relation to photography and painting. Can you talk a little bit about that blurring, what that blurring means to you?

FB: I think there’s an element in all the works in this selection of bondage or a commitment to something that the artist has also rejected. The conversation started around the Christopher Williams works because I never really understood them, but as a result of not understanding them, they’re stuck in my head. The first time I saw his work was in Los Angeles at 320PE, a gallery that I also work with in the US. He seems to be photographing photography itself. He’s rejected the romance of photography and yet is stuck with the romance of photography. How he embraces that and how Williams’s work decompresses from there on in is what interests me.

An artist like Liz Deschenes, for example, who is somehow committed to painting but is making paintings that are photographs or vice versa. It’s like she is committed to painting but she understands that actually
Trees, like palm trees in the distance, fill up the foreground. They hardly move, maybe the tops are swaying a bit, the sky behind is dull and pale blue. A wispy bit of cloud floats across the bottom. A slow rotating sound from somewhere else gets louder but still sounds distant as a heavy looking grey copter moves across the sky in front of the trees. It moves slowly but is gone quickly. Some yellow dust floats up in the wind and follows behind it, then fades back into the green. There's some music, just strobing away, about to get to something. A bit more yellow dust smokes up, leaving a huge silence behind it. Then the music kicks in. Nothing happens but dust. Then the trees behind turn the dust green, you can only see their tops. The rotor sound fades in again, another copter flies higher up this time, you can only see the bottom rails. It's passed, leaving the same misted-out background. So quietly, silently, three fires flare up into the trees. They roll upwards, blinding orange, then three more explode, one, two... three... They roll into one ginorous billowing ball, it's so huge, it's everything. Then it disappears into its own smoke, deep, murky, impenetrable, poisonous green. Just a small fleck of orange flame shows through. The music, it's singing, comes through too, it's all slow and building, "...this is the end...", it's like the first time. It's so deep, all that smoky green. The green copters float past, left to right, right to left, like shadows. The scene sort of slips past, but doesn't change much. The fire gets tugged off in the copters' wind. The picture fades into murky colours, it's impossible to work out what's what. Everything's sort of revealing itself, slowly — it's the slowest. Gradually, in the end, a face comes through. Both eyes stare straight ahead, just looking out at you. I can't tell the face cos it's upside down, but the music's getting hotter and the face is hot too. Something whirrs inconspicuously in front of it. The eyes blink, and I think they flick left. The background still passes behind, faded out behind the face. More copters, big, faded ones.
Fiona Banner
Nude Performance 2007
Performance with Ame Henderson
40 minutes
Indian ink on plaster board
Installation view, The Power Plant, Toronto
painting’s primary relationship is not really to itself, it’s to photography or film. Her image is reflective, still but constantly moving. One reason being that’s how it’s perceived; that’s how it moves around in the world. That’s its agency. There is a dilemma and a contradiction within that I like. The works in the collection that I was drawn to challenge their own medium: paintings that discuss themselves as reproduction; photographs that deny the image or perform some kind of act of self-portraiture; sculpture that declares the impossibility of (or questions) its own authenticity. Each work is in the psychiatrist’s chair, holding a mirror up to itself.

OK. One of the other issues we are looking at here is the idea of mimesis, reflection or imitation. For example, so many paintings today are represented by digital images. Increasingly, sites such as Google Art Project become sites where we experience artworks. Individuals start to think that they have experienced an object, a painting, when they may never have physically encountered it. Is there anything particular about the material of photography vs. the material of painting for you?

1b. As an artist you are constantly aware that the image weight, or the reproduction weight of the work is greater than the physical space of the work. I mean in terms of circulation and understanding. It has the broader reach. I’m quite aware of that because a lot of my work is unphotographable.

Photography commonly defaults to being objective, an idea that, of course, has been thoroughly interrogated. There is a lot of photography in the world that still purports to be objective though, which is something that photojournalism is very involved with; that notion of objectivity. I think what is interesting is that it all comes down to a photographic materiality or immateriality, as we exist in photo-related images not in paint. Painting is liberated from the objectivity debate in a way that photography isn’t.

But what do we like about painting that we don’t like about photography? I guess its tacit and subjectivity. But then I’m not that interested in that discussion about likeness. ‘Oh, ah, isn’t this Richter painting ‘Candle’ (1982) painted so brilliantly that it actually does look like a photo of a blurry candle?’ What I like about it is that it’s painted how a candle might look when it is visible only through its own light and so announces something about its own visibility and vulnerability and temporality. Somehow it addresses the very stuff of visibility and invisibility, of light and dark, of the romance of painting historically, of the potential triteness of or the potential cliché of all of that. And yet, it’s a wonderful painting, or is understood to be a wonderful painting.

Then again, ‘Candle’ probably reached more people when it was reproduced on the cover of Sonic Youths’ ‘Daydream Nation’ album (1988), than it has done as a painting, or even as a photographic image of a known painting.

OK. I want to consider your relationship to language. In some way you’re thinking for a kind of improvisation? Perhaps this can help us segue and think about some of the text pieces in the exhibition, such as Shannon Ebner’s ‘Electric Commune work, the idea of using text as a
representation of photography or as a mirror
in the show.

In Elmer's work there's a rift
between language and photography, the
coexistence of the two, and the idea of
photographing language alongside the
physical absurdity of that reasonable
gesture. The Christopher Wool erased text
paintings are very poetic, and it somehow
ends up being accepting of the failure of
the image. There's a failure of expression
in there which is probably why we love his
paintings, because that inability to make a
picture that exists free of language touches
us - we can't 'see' free of language either.

But, to get back to what you were saying,
that's why I like Andreas Gursky's Cheaps
(2005). It's not that I'm in love with Gursky.
What I'm drawn to is that it's an image that
also looks like a text, which isn't... on one
level it has an off-the-scale heroic dimension
I associate with him, yet on another level it
doesn't; it's like a stack of language.

As for me, I'm in an ongoing
dysfunctional relationship with the image.
Trying to mine that, or circumnavigate it at
least. But subject to its power and device,
like everyone.

ox: We're in a battle of the heroic image versus
the failed image.

Yes, or: CMYK vs. RGB.

The Archive of Modern Conflict made
the posters themselves on a printing
press that they bought in Bogotá,
Colombia and shipped back to the UK,
with all the original printing blocks; and
ephemera, even had an autotype with tag
batts in it.

Barber was invited to collaborate
with the Archive of Modern Conflict
by Ingrid Svenson, Director of the
independent arts organisation PEER,
in East London. The exhibition
Mubashir Qureshi - He's Not Dead, staged by
Barber in collaboration with Magnum
photographer Paolo Pellegrin and in
association with the Archive of Modern
Conflict was presented at PEER in 2014.

In 1997 Barber wrote THE NAM, a 1000
page, all-text, book describing in their
entirety famous Hollywood films about
the Vietnam war, including Full Metal
Jacket (1987), The Deer Hunter (1978),
Apocalypse Now (1979), Born on the Fourth
of July (1989), Hamburger Hill (1987) and
Platoon (1986). Director Francis Ford
Coppola based the narrative structure
for his film Apocalypse Now on Joseph
Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. Reflections
Fiona Banner

Courten, Slipstream, Optical 2003

Full Stops

Steel, paint