

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin
Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery
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How do you work together on a shoot?

Oliver Chanarin: There's all different people that are in some way involved in the industry.

Adam Broomberg: If you just look at the kind of moment we've captured on that Polaroid.

Oliver Chanarin: It's just quite an internal thing - almost like listening to something, or just thinking about something, quite absent in a way.

Adam Broomberg: Mmm, I thought that one of him looking down...

Oliver Chanarin: Mmm ... like almost kind of ...

(Classical music starts playing in the background)

Oliver Chanarin: But we'll direct you, we're going to do ten stills, ten shots, and we'll direct you, it won't take very long.

Hans Snook: Right, jolly good.

Adam Broomberg: That was too late, was it on?

Oliver Chanarin: We'll do one more like that.

Adam Broomberg: Looks nice, just hold that.

Adam Broomberg: If you drop your chin and also lower your eyes, yes, almost kind of look down, that's it.

Adam Broomberg: Right, OK, If you just keep that position but turn your head, kind of towards ... that's it, and then look down, that's brilliant.

Oliver Chanarin: And lets do one, if you look that way, that's good. Just like that. If you just hold very still in that position and if you could just shift your head a little bit to your right, that's it, that's great.

Oliver Chanarin: That's it!

Adam Broomberg: All done.

Hans Snook: Well, that's fantastic.

For how long have you worked together?

Oliver Chanarin: Adam and I have been working together for about seven years and yes, some people find it strange the idea of two people taking one picture but for us it's never really felt that odd and I think because we work with a large format camera, it's quite a cumbersome thing, but more importantly I think, when you take a photograph there are so many different decisions that you make along the way towards creating an image and really clicking that button is the last of those decisions, when to click the button. But there's so many other decisions that you make about where you're going to go, who you're going to photograph and why you're photographing them and what the political context is of the picture. And we make all those decisions together as really a conversation, each photograph is a result of a conversation between us, I mean that's really how we work.

Adam Broomberg: And then I think because we work in some really sensitive communities it's just really important that the rapport with the person is always a sensitive one and always a respectful one and I think that really helps when there are the two of us, you know it's not one person stuck behind this camera and it's not that barrier. There's always one person engaging with the subject.

What is the idea behind the telecoms series?

Oliver Chanarin: I think for this project it made sense to come up with a visual concept, you know, we were presented with sixteen different people involved in the telecoms industry in lots of different ways and also we were only able really to get access to them in very different environments and I think we all felt in discussion with the National Portrait Gallery that it needed some kind of coherent visual concept to bring everything together. That's why I think in this case we decided to apply the concept.

Adam Broomberg: I think it's really interesting when you get absorbed into one subject and it actually becomes a kind of investigation into it, so it's more than just about executing a

photograph, it's more about investigating a subject or a community and really kind of investing time and investing yourself into that subject matter.

Oliver Chanarin: A lot of the people that we've photographed in our book *Ghetto* and also in our last book *Mr Mkhize's Portrait*. They're photographs of people that are very inexperienced in terms of photography, many of those people had never been photographed before and a lot of those people are very naïve as well about the process of photography and the power of an image and what happens to that image after it's been photographed and so there's a very different power relationship there I think between the photographer and the sitter. In this case it's obviously very different, there's much more of an understanding about what's happening. I think that poses a challenge for us in a way, there's something in a way less exotic about it that also made it a real challenge and forced us to really think about how we wanted to approach it.

Adam Broomberg: In this case we've gone for very different feeling and I think the notion that kind of big business people, very empowered politicians, very enfranchised people are symbols of power rather than emotions and I think our interpretation of this was to look for that kind of internal moment, somebody's kind of deep inner thoughts rather than the symbol of power and presence.

Are your portraits a collaboration with the sitters?

Oliver Chanarin: I mean the way we've been working with the sitters is as a result of a collaboration. We ask them to sit, we show them a Polaroid of the previous person we've photographed and we explain to them a little bit about what our intentions are, as Adam says, what we're looking for really is an internal moment, the inverse of a 'National Portrait' portrait in a way. What we want to avoid is a photograph that says 'Hi this is me, look how important I am' and rather find something much more internalised. And we explain that to the sitter and then with quite careful, umm... what's the word...

Adam Broomberg: ...choreography, almost, isn't it? It is kind of, and I think you're right, in this case it's slightly more choreographed than allowing somebody just to find a comfortable position for themselves and that's been really interesting for us to do.

Why use the same technique for the telecoms series?

Adam Broomberg: The aesthetic mechanism we've chosen to solve this particular problem, this subject, kind of even outs all the portraits, and I think it doesn't matter what the gender of the sitter is.

How important is context in your photographs?

Oliver Chanarin: The context that you take a photograph in is obviously crucial to informing what the photograph means and we've photographed in the past in all different environments - in prisons in South Africa, in psychiatric hospitals in Cuba and we've visited military bases in Russia. I think wherever you go obviously the laws and the rules about being photographed are different and also there's an enormous intimacy, and I think what Adam was saying about Tessa, she's a good example in South Africa, was that she was raped when she was sixteen and we began to photograph her and then we started to interview her and then we heard her story and then we wanted to photograph her again having heard her story and I think for us, often, talking to people and interviewing them and finding out the experiences of their lives informs the way we then photograph them.

How do you prepare for a shoot?

Oliver Chanarin: I think for this commission one of the problematic things was the time that we had with the people and also the environment that we were shooting in. Most of the people we only ever got access to them in their offices and like you say, some of the people we were able to go to their homes and some came to our studio here and we wanted to try to make something quite democratic in a way, where everyone was almost in the same place. The other option obviously was to photograph them in situ but we felt that that would

lend itself to a more editorial kind of image. What we did was we created a background, a dark background which basically eliminated all the environment.

Adam Broomberg: And I think the fact that we were aiming for something so internal rather than informational, we wanted to just reduce it down to the bare minimum, so it's actually, you're not even looking into the eyes of the subject.

Oliver Chanarin: We do a lot of the thinking really before we take the picture and certainly in this case for this commission. Obviously there was a lot of discussion and a lot of thinking going on behind how we're going to photograph these people, are we going to do them in their environments or are we going to take them out of their environments, are we going to use the studio, are they going to look into the camera, are they going to look away, all these decisions that go on in the process of making an image and I think all the work is there really and it's not really important to take a lot of pictures once you've got them in the room and you've made all those other decisions, you know, ten single frames is all that's really needed.

Why do you use a large format camera?

Oliver Chanarin: Working with a large format camera has a big effect on the experience of being photographed, I mean, first it's a very old piece of machinery, it's forty years old and I think as a machine it's less threatening. It's also very slow and I think that's an important distinction because the sitter feels much more empowered in a way, there isn't really the risk that we're going to snap them or photograph them at a moment which they might not feel comfortable with. The whole thing works in such a slow way and such a collaborative process that the sitter is in as much position of power in a way as we are and I think that's an important distinction.

How do you know when you have captured the shot you want?

Adam Broomberg: You do know when you have just got the shot, it's just a mixture of that look and that moment. The main thing is just to get them to relax really and kind of almost try and forget that they are sitting in front of quite an ominous piece of technology and often we've asked people just to close their eyes and to just keep breathing because it's kind of that one moment when people are quite into that project and just relaxed when we get that shot.

Oliver Chanarin: I think something happens to the surface of a person's face, it almost softens and you're just allowed in and when it happens you can see it, it's very obvious, the hardness goes out of the eyes and the mouth relaxes and suddenly you feel like you're not looking at the surface of somebody's face, but you're actually being allowed in - in some way.

Adam Broomberg: You know, you can read into a photograph in a lot of ways but essentially a lot of craft can give you that feeling of intimacy in a portrait that's not necessarily true.

Oliver Chanarin: The choice also happens in the editing, when you're removed from the experience of taking the picture and you're looking at all the different options I think, that's the moment when you can see.

Adam Broomberg: There's so much to do with light and there's so much to do with printing and editing.

Oliver Chanarin: When we're choosing an exhibition image, we're choosing an image not as a single image but in response to all the other images in the exhibition.

Adam Broomberg: There's also the idea of kind of looking for an element of honesty and because I think in this mechanism we've chosen to use there's the danger of it looking really contrived because it's so choreographed in its process, in its creation and it really just needs to look like there's a moment of integrity there.