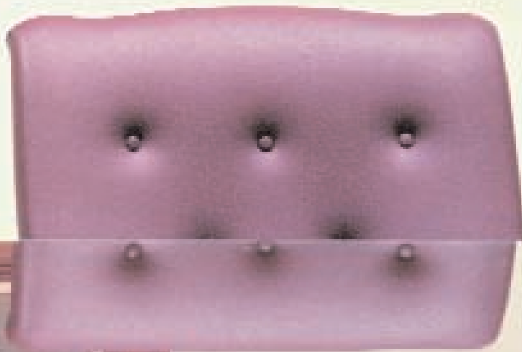
AN OUTSIDER'S GUIDE TO GETTING INSIDE PLACES ONLY INSIDERS NORMALLY GET TO GO

JASON ODDY TALKS WITH ADAM BROOMBERG, OLIVER CHANARIN, AND JILL MAGID ABOUT INSTITUTIONS, ACCESS, AND ART



Nothing is more fascinating than a secret. The closed door holds more appeal than the gate wide open. The "No" titillates in ways a "Yes" never can. As anyone who has ever been in love understands, an unyielding object causes us to change shape, molding us whichever way we believe might yet oblige. In his 1935 essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," the avant-garde French sociologist Roger Caillois postulated an instinct that would have us disappear into our surroundings. Like a sort of death drive, this "assimilation to space" orients us toward a subdued state of being, a diminution of ego that may cause us to vanish altogether.

As an artist whose work has brought me into contact with institutions such as the U.S. military, I've begun to understand what this loss of distinction between oneself and one's environment might mean. Not just the institutions' attempts to impress uniformity on the surrounding world. But also how the process of making work is influenced by the institutions' conventions, is obliged to insinuate itself into their way of thinking. Perhaps this is no bad thing—to make an institution properly visible the artist may have to recede into the background. Not quite in the manner of Gyges the shepherd in Plato's *Republic,* who, finding a ring that could make him invisible, ended up king. But instead more like the Cheshire Cat, knowing how to appear and—more importantly—disappear, sometimes leaving only a grin behind.

If art was once in the service of power, nowadays the relationship between them is more like a game of hide-and-seek. The billions spent by the U.S. military on Stealth bombers and, if recent reports are to be believed, on invisibility cloaks, are testament to the value placed on remaining invisible. Likewise the artist must stay camouflaged. In 2003 I entered Guantánamo Bay in the guise of a photojournalist and returned with numerous photojournalistic images. Uncomfortable with the fact that the only pictures I had been allowed to take were those the U.S. military directed me to, I later used them to make a series of diptychs designed to cancel out any act of straightforward representation. When Jill Magid was commissioned by the Dutch Intelligence and Security Service to make a work of art for their new premises she turned undercover agent, almost unmasking their agents in the process. For another project, she persuaded the Dutch police to hire her to decorate the city's CCTV cameras with rhinestones by presenting herself as a "Security Ornamentation Professional." For *LOVE (Lincoln Ocean Victor Eddy),* she convinced a New York City police officer to train her off the record during his night shift in the subway. Embedded with the British Army in Helmand Province in Afghanistan, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who have worked together for the last ten years, bamboozled their minders long enough to create *The Day Nobody Died,* a photographic portrait of war that not only questions the morality of representing conflict, but also the possibility of doing so at all. Their project *Chicago* is set in a fake Arab village constructed by the Israeli Defense Forces in the middle of the Negev Desert for urban military training. In the exchange that follows, we discuss these and other works and ask what the stakes are when dealing with an institution. These are circumspect times and one thing is clear. The last player to reveal their hand wins.
—Jason Oddy

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Adam Broomberg: I went to a talk by Harun Farocki the other night and something he said struck me as resonant for this conversation. That the Pentagon is inaccessible from five sides, so we should use the sixth one.

Jill Magid: That's a great opening. Pun intended.

Jason Oddy: I'd like to start with a proposition. We're all involved with making work that involves institutions, whether military, civic, etc. When I've gone to places like Guantánamo Bay, the Pentagon, and, most recently, a small town in the New Mexico desert that the U.S. Department of

Opening spread: Jason Oddy, *Untitled, The Pentagon, Washington D.C., USA* (detail), C-type print (50 x 64 in.), 2003. Courtesy The Photographers' Gallery, London, and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Right: Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *Timmy, Peter and Frederick (Pollsmoor Prison, South Africa)*, C41-type print (40 x 30 in.), 2003. Courtesy Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

Homeland Security bought a few years ago to rehearse the War on Terror, it has seemed to me that there are always several stages to the process. First you have to approach the institution, persuading them that you are viable and aren't out to make mischief. This already necessitates a certain attitude, perhaps a degree of (self-) restraint.

Jill: My approach to an institution or power structure has been different each time. For *System Azure* I first went to the police in Amsterdam and straightforwardly told them I was an artist and wanted to make an artwork using their surveillance cameras by covering them with fake jewels. They told me they did not work with artists. I realized that they could not hear me when I spoke as an artist; this had nothing to do with what I proposed, but with who I was. So I came back with the same proposal, but introduced myself as a "security ornamentation professional" working with surveillance as it relates to the public. They understood this approach, agreed to speak with me, and, finally, to hire me.

Adam: Our approach has fairly consistently involved duplicity. We convinced the Israeli Defense Forces that we would make a sympathetic portrait of them, and they believed us because we are Jewish. We convinced the UK Ministry of Defence of the same thing, and they believed us because we are photographers.

Oliver Chanarin: Adam and I have often referred to Janet Malcolm's book, *The Journalist and the Murderer,* which explores the ways in which journalists exploit their subjects. It poses the

question, why do people agree to talk to journalists in the first place? The same question can be posited in relation to institutions. Why do they agree to let us in?

Jill: I think it's an issue of language and meaning. When I approached the police for *System Azure,* they were wary because they associated art with leisure (i.e., a waste of time) or feared they'd be made vulnerable or would be critiqued by collaborating. But to the Dutch Intelligence Agency, being an artist made me invisible. That institution gave no power to art.

Jason: I often have the impression that in the end the institutions I've dealt with—the U.S. military in particular—believe themselves so invulnerable that they don't care what you do.

Jill: Exactly. We crawl under the radar until we do something that makes us visible.

Adam: Our experience has been different. The British military tried their utmost to control us, as did the Israelis while we were in their company. It is interesting to consider their response to the work once it was published. The Israelis have a perfect tactic when it comes to dealing with work that is critical and that is to ignore it entirely.

Oliver: Still, institutions, prisons, armies, corporations—not unlike individuals—have a sense of vanity and pride about what they do and wish to make their activities visible on some level.

Jill: That's a great point. I'm often asked why people have collaborated with me, and I think it was due to some combination of vanity, pride, and loneliness. But it's important to focus on the point when vanity or pride move aside and you get to something more sensitive. Otherwise it's all about finding the loophole and getting in, which is a necessary part of the process, but not the main objective. I want to engage the system on an intimate, personal level, and for that, access is required.

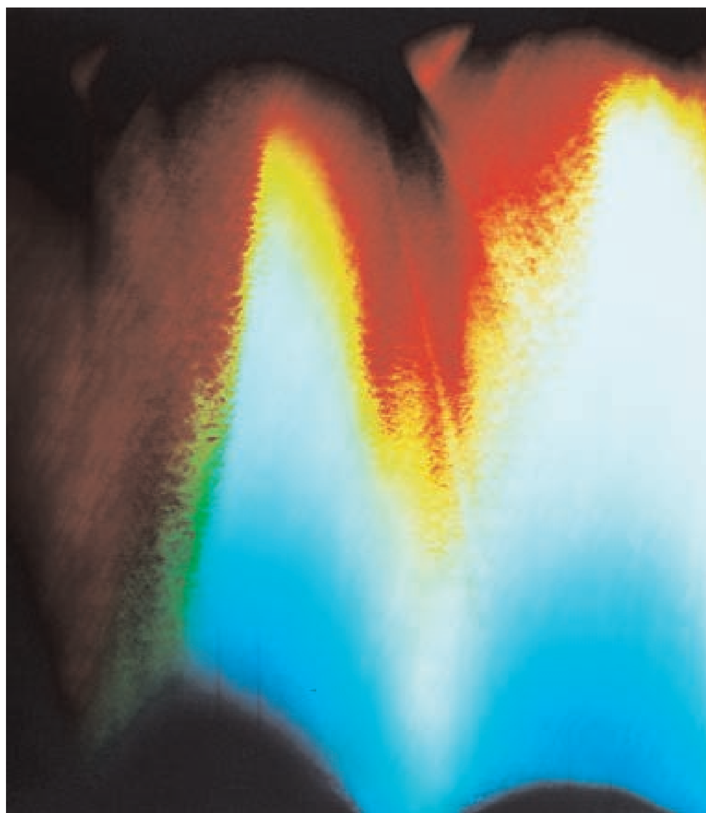
Jason: Normally I'd say that to make successful work about an institution you have to use seduction, while also allowing yourself—for a certain period of time at least—to be seduced. For me, when I'm taking pictures, this happens on a formal level. With photography, particularly photography of institutions and institutional space, there is a very fine line between simply replicating what is there and delineating it in a manner that shows a critical consciousness of the subject. I've come to realize that the most effective way to draw attention to a space, to point to the structures and the intentions that inform it, is momentarily to

Left: Jason Oddy, *Untitled, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba*, digital C-type prints on Fuji Crystal Archive, 2003–8. Courtesy The Photographers' Gallery, London, and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

"become" it. There's an instant when you instinctively know that the picture is working, as if you've tuned into or are inhabited by what you are looking at.

Jill: I totally agree with Jason! That line of seducing and being seduced is so necessary, and so scary. I know I'm in the right place when I truly struggle with that.

Jason: But I think seduction is natural. There is a myth that institutions (whether the U.S. Army or the British Army, the IDF, or the Dutch Secret Service) are extra- or supra-human. Of course, what's easily forgotten is that they all incorporate certain human traits—abstractions of fundamental drives and fears—that human beings, ourselves included, derive comfort from. What I suppose I'm trying to say is that collusion with an institution is not really collusion with an entity outside of ourselves. Rather it's identification or collaboration with a certain part—or certain parts—of ourselves, albeit a part that is somewhat pared down, even simplified. Sometimes I feel envy for the certainties an institutional life seems to offer.

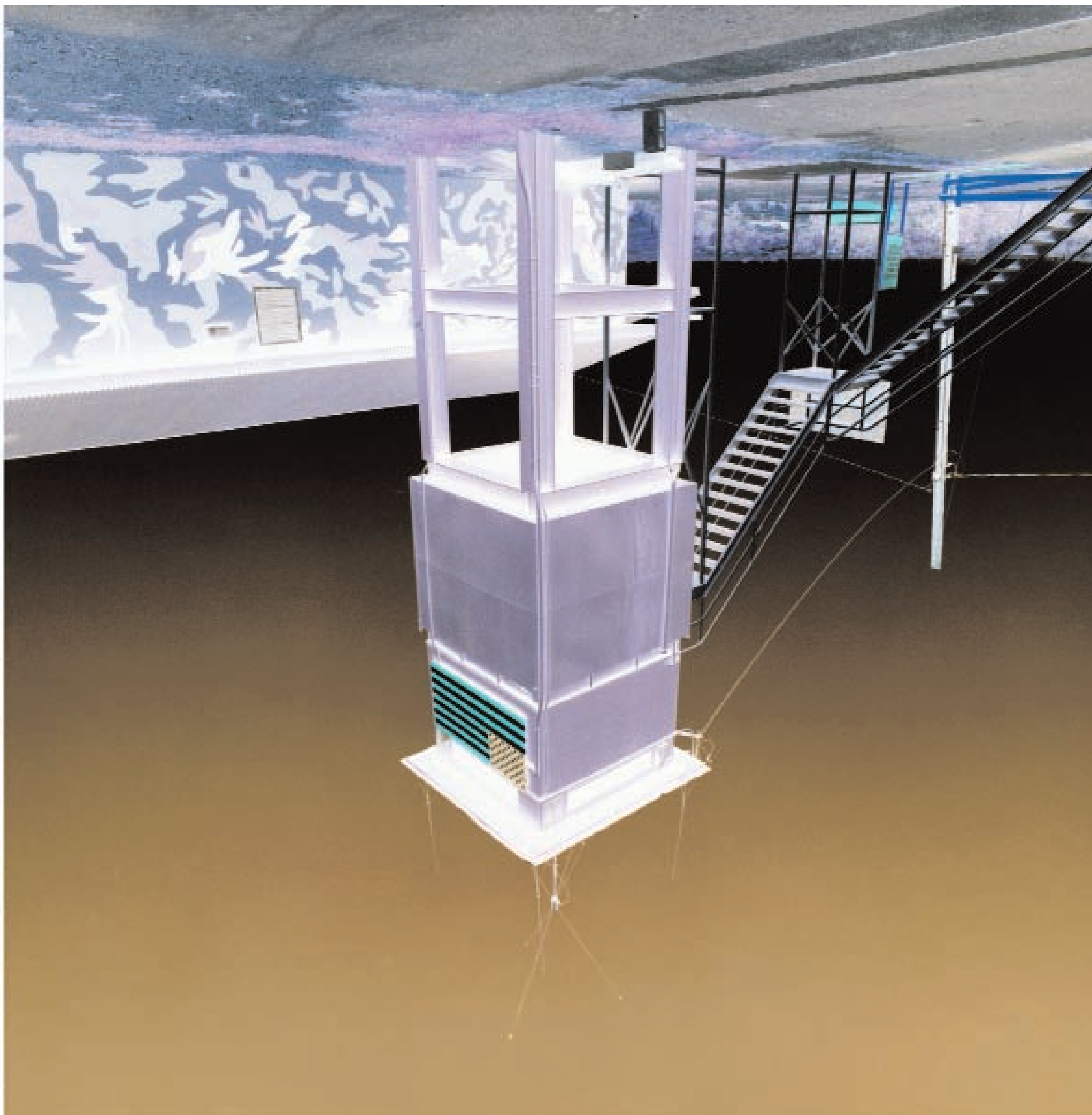


Below: Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *The Press Conference* (detail) from *The Day Nobody Died*, C-type print (30 x 236 in.), 2008. Courtesy Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

Oliver: I wonder, Jill, if being a woman—say, with the project *LOVE (Lincoln Ocean Victor Eddy)*—was significant in terms of that seduction?

Jill: That word has so many meanings. Jason's definition made me think of Baudrillard's theory of seduction, which treats it as an engagement, a cycle, a form of exchange. In *LOVE* there is this kind of seduction as well as a sexual one, registered in the tension between the cop and myself. These forms of seduction intermingle in some cases but not in all; the Dutch project was more of an intellectual seduction. I was hired to find the "human face"—the persona—of the secret organization by meeting

Jason Oddy, *Untitled, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba*, digital C-type prints on Fuji Crystal Archive, 2003–8
Courtesy The Photographers' Gallery, London, and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York



agents who worked in it. Our conversations were seductive in a Baudrillardian sense. As for the word "collusion," I don't think it applies to my work because I am careful to maintain the rules of the institution. I think that by staying within them I can reveal more or, rather, let the system reveal itself with all its faults and assumptions.

Adam: I would like to know what you both think about the morality of your work. Do you ever feel it is underhanded or unethical to get access and then be critical?

Jill: I don't feel I have been unethical or underhanded, as I do not enter a system in the hopes of overturning it or exposing it against itself. I want to experience the system as directly as I can and expose my personal experience with it. The judgment of that exposure is left to the viewer.

Oliver: Jill, that is something I love about your projects. It's a playful and very human engagement. I think Adam and I have been less generous, perhaps.

Adam: I think our work is more polemic. Either way, I don't feel it is immoral because I don't feel represented by our political institutions, with the way they respond to killing or whom they decide to kill.

Jill: I've been in a very difficult situation with *Article 12,* as the Dutch Intelligence Agency has kept changing the rules. I originally proposed to write a book on the "human face" of the agency, but as the project progressed I felt I could not find a way to write it. I could not get my head around where I was in that system because those who controlled it kept me at bay. So I took fragments from the notebooks I'd been keeping on my meetings with agents and made "art objects" out of them, including a series of letterpress prints called "The 18 Spies" and an installation of neon words called *I Can Burn Your Face,* and presented them in an exhibition at Stroom, a public gallery in The Hague. The agency had approved the exhibition in advance, but the day before the opening I gave them a rough edit of the book, which I had rewritten after I'd made the art objects. That was when the agency's power came down on me. It is currently trying to stop publication of the book and has confiscated seven of "The 18 Spies" prints. When they changed the rules, I wanted to change the rules. It was the first time I felt angry with a system and considered going against it.

Jason: With Guantánamo they pre-edited everything. You had to sign a long document beforehand saying exactly what you wouldn't do, at risk of being expelled there and then.

Jill: What a fantastic document! I would love to see that!

Oliver: This is the case with all embedded journalism, to some extent. The rules say so much. In Afghanistan it felt like the army was lifting our camera, composing our pictures, and clicking the shutter. Our problem, the problem we perceived, was how could we actually be subversive in this kind of scenario.

Adam: In Afghanistan we began to feel that the performative aspect of the work was the most transgressive. We weren't behaving like photojournalists, and we weren't creating the narrative the military relies on to make sense of where they are and why they're there. Sometimes we felt like counterspies. We would whisper to each other at night in the tent and creep around the base. Our actions

definitely aroused suspicion, and that's when it got interesting. Some soldiers found it hilarious: a bit of a Dada-esque stunt.

Jason: I'd say the rules are, to some extent, what determine the work. I'd like to ask everyone to respond to this.

Jill: Without the rules I am lost. When I am "in" a system, one of my main objectives is to understand its mechanisms, its language (how to speak in its voice), and its boundaries. That is why the Dutch project was so confusing: they continually tried to hide the boundaries from me so I could not figure out where I was. It's always a challenge for me to show the process of learning that space, especially visually. Writing is easier. The more rules I am given, the more material I have to work with. That is another reason to adhere to them.

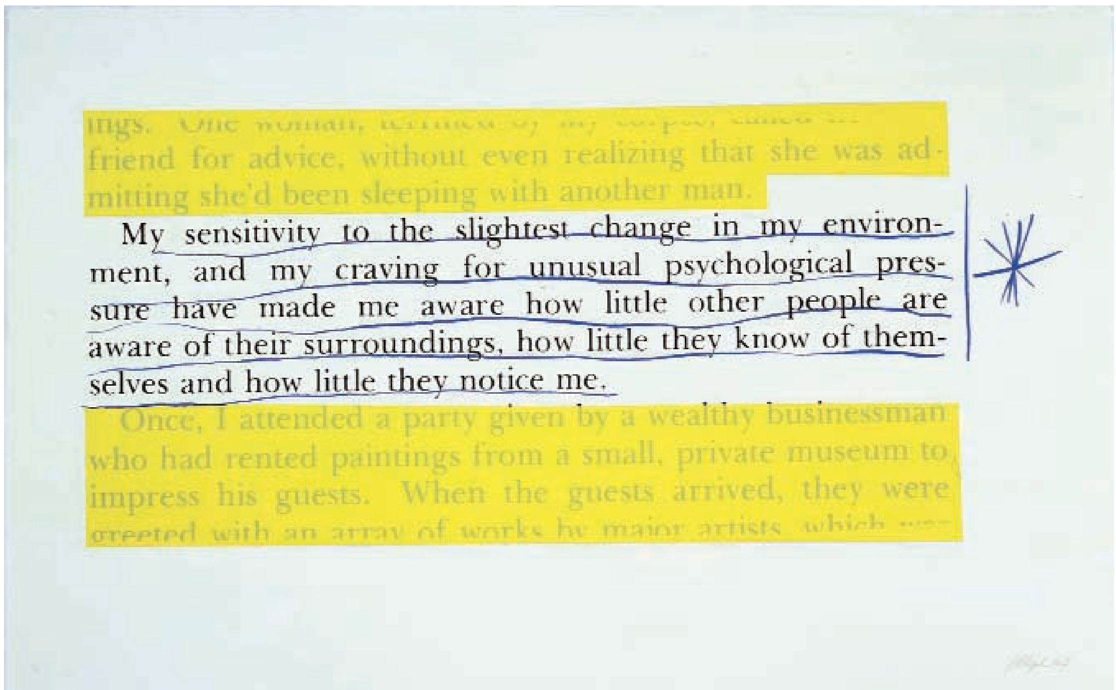
Oliver: In Afghanistan we took the inverse strategy. Complying with the rules would have led us to produce exactly the images that the British Army was expecting us to produce. And while that in itself is interesting, it would not have served our intention to make the workings of the embedding system evident. We were actively resisting their rules.

Jill: That is still an act in relation to the rules.

Oliver: Yes, but I think that our interest in "breaking in" began in a more mundane way, a sort of dumb curiosity about the world and what was deemed invisible. Photography seemed like a powerful way to move through these environments. The camera is a sort of passport, a reason in itself to be there.

Jason: I managed to breach the Pentagon with my camera. I was fascinated with what power might look like, even in its banal aspects. What

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, from *Chicago*, C-type print (19 x 23 in.), 2006. Courtesy Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa



Jill Magid, *My Sensitivity*, four-color silkscreen on Reeves BKF paper (27 1/2 x 44 in.), 2007, edition of 15. © Jill Magid
Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert, Paris/New York

I found was that the structures and ambitions embedded in the architecture of such a place resonated with me. You can see how the world tries to be controlling, and how this attempt at control manifests itself in the architecture. It's an extreme example, perhaps, but in a place like the Pentagon you see the rules writ large. As an artist, one of the fundamental questions in all this is, How do you represent power?—especially since power always wants to stage-manage its own appearance. Adam and Oliver, in your work *The Day Nobody Died,* you refuse—absolutely—to represent power, or even the effects of power. Instead, you opt for a strategy of pure abstraction. Can you explain your reasons for this approach?

Adam: In fact, a film showing our performance—transporting this box of photographic paper from our studio to the front line and back—is always projected next to the photographic "images." The project becomes subversive not only because we refused to pick up a camera, refused the role of photojournalist, refused to contribute to the narrative that the military would have wanted us to make, but because the soldiers are the ones transporting the box of paper from our studio to the front line and back. We had co-opted them into being actors taking part in this odd performance. So in this way we do represent power, but instead of our serving them we have reversed the roles.

Jason: I like the idea that you, or your proxy, the box, was manipulated and manhandled by the British Army. As you put it, you were being maneuvered by the machine. This is what your film shows. Am I right?

Adam: Yes, the box becomes our (and your) proxy: a kind of mute witness, something you can relate to in a frame that is otherwise full of images of war, images that usually leave us cold or alienated.

Oliver: We understood that embedded journalism is not really journalism but a sort of collusion, that

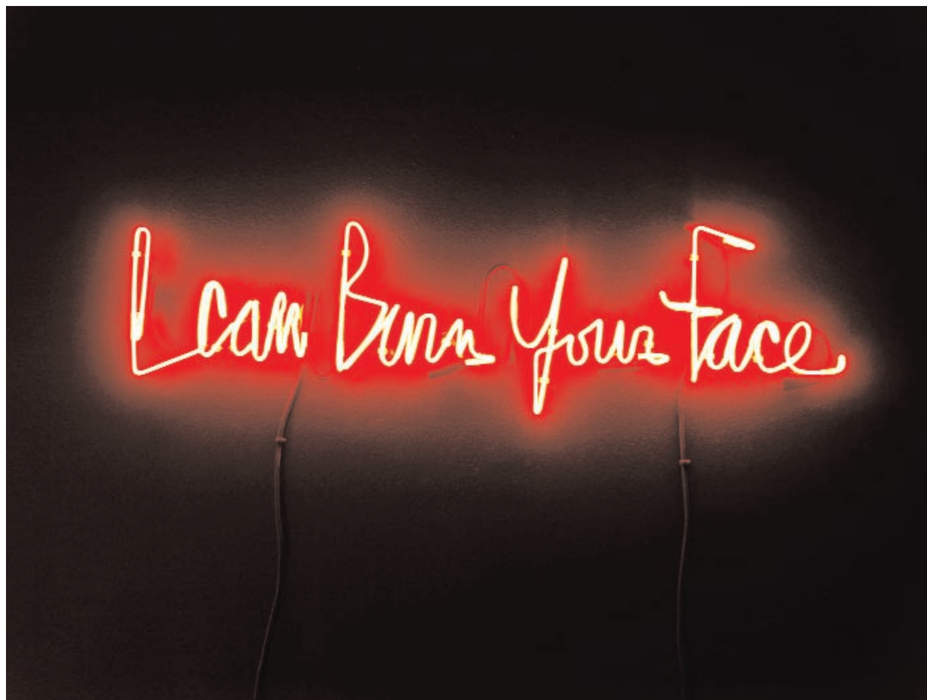
conflict photographers who think of themselves as antiwar photographers are really just a cog in the machinery of war. So our project is not really about Afghanistan but about the system of embedding. Abstraction felt like one strategy in subverting that. There is a famous Palestinian cartoon character by Naji el Ali that has existed for many years named Hanzala, who is always seen from the back, his hands clenched, observing. Our box is like Hanzala; it is a silent witness in the same way.

Jason: When working with power, one always has to surrender a degree of control. Adam and Oliver, I'd like to ask how much control you had over the end result of *The Day Nobody Died.* The traces of light on the photographic paper look like scorch marks, as if image making—even this rudimentary, almost antithetical version of it—were inherently perilous. Did you do tests beforehand? Is this how you imagined the work would turn out? And how do you read the results? Do you consider the form they have taken to be significant?

Oliver: It's all about the film and the performance, as Adam has mentioned. We were not concerned with how the photographs came out. In fact, at one point we considered treating our rolls of photographic paper as objects in this way, never unrolling them, but presenting them, as Manzoni presents his line drawings, rolled up in containers, as objects. Having said that, we did do tests. We wanted to know how many seconds we should

Jason Oddy, *Untitled, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba*, digital C-type prints on Fuji Crystal Archive, 2003–8
Courtesy The Photographers' Gallery, London, and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Jill Magid, *I Can Burn Your Face*, neon (12 x 38 in.), 2008, edition of 18. © Jill Magid. Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert, Paris/ New York. Photo by Rob Kollaard



expose the paper in order for the light to penetrate. Light becomes the protagonist.

Adam: The form of the photographs is problematic. It's interesting to see how people project on to the shapes, but at the same time we never intended them to be substitutes for images of conflict or trauma. What is missing from them is what is most important to us, not what is present. In a way, the photographs are more important to us as visceral objects than images: six-meter long sheets of paper that were at the scene of a crime and brought back. Their dust and scratches and the light's mark making act as a strange sort of evidence.

Jason: What about you, Jill?

Jill: When a project is really working, when I am engaged with a power (or a person in a position of power), control is something that flips back and forth between us, or seems to flip back and forth. I've had situations where I believe I'm in control and then something happens to prove to me that I am not. As for how the visible artwork comes out, it is strongly affected by the system from which it emerged. When Adam said he did not care how the photo looked, I understand that well. If it came out "beautifully" in a traditional sense, that is a bonus, but the beauty for me in these cases is often the very act of making a closed system visible.

Jason: I think what arises from working with institutions and what, Jill, your work makes apparent are a greater sense of their paradoxes and inconsistencies. Perhaps we can even talk about something like an "institutional fallacy," a belief held by institutions that they possess some totalizing system, one that has all the answers. Artists are naturally suspicious of such logic. They come armed with questions. When an artist chooses an institution as her subject matter, these two approaches collide.

Oliver: A good example. . . . While we were working in Israel with the IDF we were taken on a tour of the security wall between Israel and the West Bank. The soldier got very angry with us because we kept referring to it as a wall. "It's not a wall, it's a fence," he kept reminding us. This terminology

is, Jason, I suppose part of what you're describing as the institutional fallacy?

Jason: Well, I think the institutional fallacy is simply a belief that the world can be explained simply and according to the system the institution subscribes to. Jill's example of the institution being unable to see the art object, but of course being able to read (decipher, shall we say) text is a good example. So, yes, terminology plays its part.

Jill: I found this to be especially true with metaphor. By examining an institution's use of metaphor, we see what aspect of power rises to the surface. With the Dutch Intelligence Agency I could not find anything solid to hold on to, so I was left with the words and phrases agents used. For example, I made the piece called *I Can Burn Your Face.* Burning a face is the agency's term meaning "to expose an agent's identity." The fact that *I* could burn *them* was the only reason they thought I was dangerous. That led to conversations about source protection. They compared themselves to the CIA, saying that, in terms of source protection, CIA agents are cowboys and Dutch agents are shepherds. Metaphors like these were expanded upon, giving me a deeper understanding of how one agency defined itself in relation to one another (in this case, American power versus Dutch power).

Jason: Institutions are, by and large, organizations that encourage sameness, and anything that appears different, or other, is looked on with suspicion. You have to adopt a certain language, or at least a tone—an attitude—that reassures by replicating their outlook. It's the beginning of a process of conformity, or at least of becoming in some way as invisible as possible, of keeping your head below the parapet.

Jill: I think that depends on which level within the hierarchy you enter. In *Lincoln Ocean Victor Eddy,* I took the MTA's [New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority's] threat—that all passengers may be subject to a search for security purposes—literally and approached officers by asking them to search me. My request was so bizarre (like Adam and Oliver's proxy box) that only one officer responded to me, explaining why he couldn't: I was a woman and he was a male officer. I did not know that, so I asked him to train me instead, and he agreed. But with the Dutch Agency I had to get access in a more formal manner and speak in a language that made sense to the higher administration before I could get official security clearance.

Oliver: One of our first experiences negotiating an institution occurred during a stint in Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison in South Africa, a facility that is home to thousands of the most dangerous prisoners in the country. When the guards told us not to tell the prisoners that the electric fence containing the prison no longer worked, we suddenly understood our special status there. Within institutions there are levels of access and, at Pollsmoor, getting permission from the government was relatively simple. The ANC [African National Congress party] were keen to show off the problems they had inherited from the apartheid government. Convincing the gang leaders, who, as we discovered, were in control of the social structure of the prison, was another thing, another kind of seduction, to use a previous phrase.

Adam: Jason, I am not sure I agree with your proposition. Firstly, I think that the power apparatuses that we have encountered have been really very sophisticated. The IDF have theorists on their advisory boards and in their think tanks that read Derrida. They are reading left philosophy to keep on top of what they are up against.

Jill: Often the institution agreeing to work with us wants something from us. It's how we work with their desires and our own.

Adam: Precisely.

Oliver: It's a sort of twisted love affair.