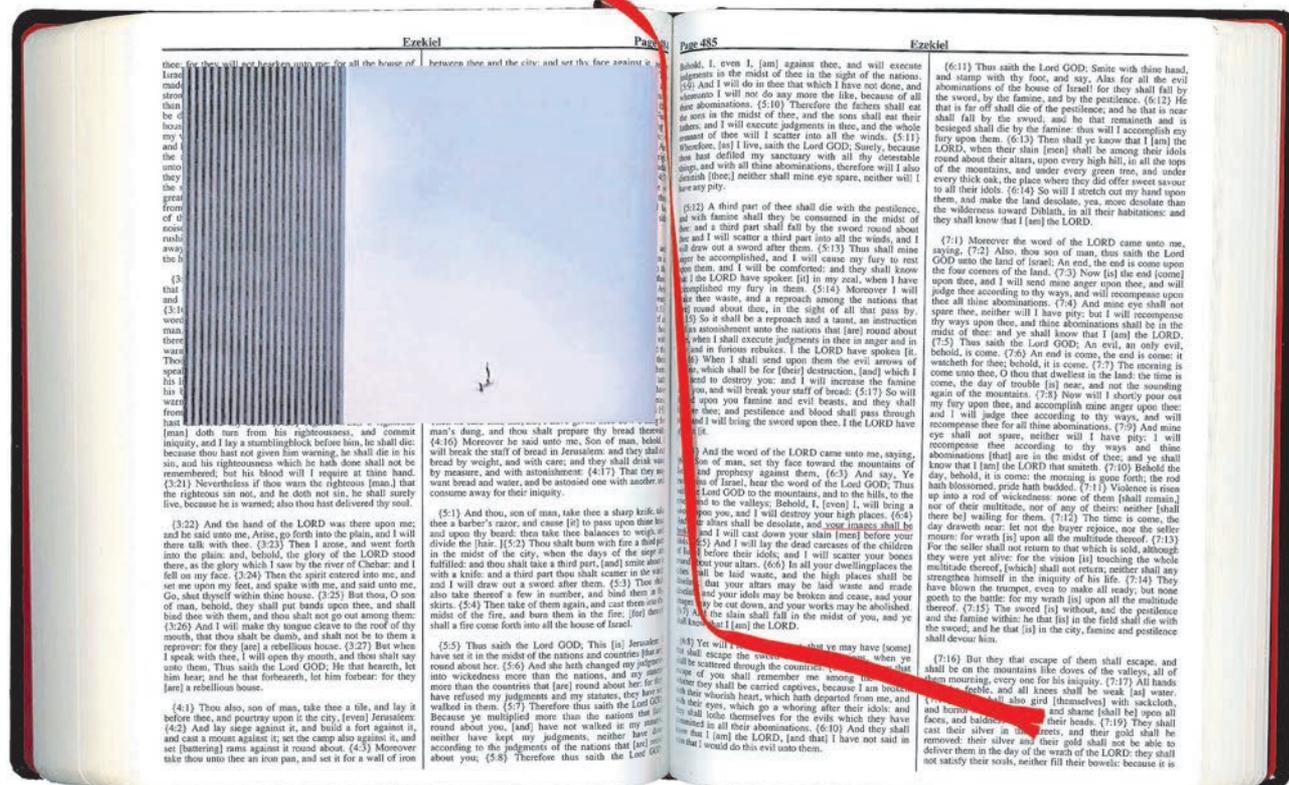


## Art

## The Atrocity Exhibition

Have you heard the bad news? BY R.C. BAKER



Mack/Archive of Modern Conflict

When one reads in the Bible that Joshua burned the city of Ai “and made it a heap forever” and “the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide,” the printed words help keep us at an abstract remove from the violence. A photograph of a lynching, however, creates more immediately visceral horror and empathy: *There but for the grace of God go I*. Yet is it really God’s grace that prevents us from becoming the victim — or perpetrator — of evil?

What better tome to encompass these mysteries — evil, grace, God, graven imagery — than the Holy Bible? Illustrated bibles are nothing new, but photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chananin have overprinted the scriptures with photos of conflict, trickery, love, death, and perversion, not so much subverting the book as laying it bare.

The pair was inspired by a Bible of Bertolt Brecht’s, which he had filled with notes and collaged newspaper photos. The troublemaking genius dedicated to exposing theatrical artifice to audiences was also, as Chananin notes in a *Wired UK* interview, “so suspicious of press images that he referred to them as hieroglyphics in need of deciphering or decoding.” Broomberg and Chananin emphasize this ongoing dilemma through their use of unlabeled pictures culled from London’s Archive of Modern Conflict. Bizarre and wide-ranging, their

selection of images comes as a genuine surprise when one opens the book, which appears to be a standard Bible, replete with faux-leather cover, red-ribbon bookmark, and gilt-edged pages.

The opening of Genesis has been illustrated with a negative image of a male photographer grasping a model’s chin, a comely woman with her hands clasped around her knees. At the bottom of the page, God’s declaration, “Let us make man in our image” is underlined. (“Woman,” as we know, had to await further developments.) Singling out selected phrases with red underlines is a tad obvious, but these ersatz captions chime poetically with the pictures. In Psalm 86, a snapshot of a young woman wearing a Star of David patch and a bright smile is placed opposite the highlighted phrase “delivered my soul from the lowest hell.” Was she in fact safe from the Nazis, or just unaware of her coming fate?

Throughout, photos of levitating magicians and circus performers challenge the credulity necessary to accept the Bible as literal truth. On one page, a picture of a man in a Hitler mask performing cunnilingus on his partner perhaps satirizes all the begetting, incest, and rape to be found within these hallowed verses. Chananin points out that death permeates the Old Testament “on an epic scale and the victims hardly ever know what they have done to deserve such retribution.” The artists amplify this idea in Exodus by posi-

## Ezekiel 6:3: “I will bring a sword upon you, and destroy your high places.”

tioning what might be an ethnographic study collecting close-ups of Asian eyes opposite a photo of a mushroom cloud. This juxtaposition is a reminder that those who witnessed the atomic explosion over Hiroshima — even as they were being vaporized — had no comprehension of their role in the historic moment when humanity unleashed Godlike powers of destruction.

## BROOMBERG AND CHANANIN HAVE OVERPRINTED THE SCRIPTURES WITH PHOTOS OF CONFLICT, LOVE, DEATH, AND PERVERSION.

Although photography seems effortless today, with worldwide dissemination of the most banal or disgusting snapshot just a cellphone swipe away, talented provocateurs can still raise graphic hell. What, after all, was Kanye West doing at the 12-12-12 concert with that print of Caravaggio’s *Deposition* on his black hoodie other than consciously moving his musical conglomerate into some new, Baroque epoch? The spare stage set and stark lighting echoed the 17th-century painter’s vision of Christ being entombed, even as Kanye, a

## Holy Bible

By Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chananin  
Mack/Archive of Modern Conflict  
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living, gyrating collage, seemed to be heralding his own second coming: It took more than three days to arrive, but Yeezus is finally among us.

Like Kanye, Broomberg and Chananin appreciate that religion is the third rail of culture. Still, is it too easy for them to underline “worship the beast and his image” in the last pages of Revelation and then plaster the facing page with a photo of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center? Perhaps. But it is undoubtedly disturbing, after more than a decade of war driven by Islamic fundamentalism on one side and Bush’s “crusade” on the other, to realize that another underlined phrase — “victory over the beast, and over his image” — eternally eludes us.

This is disconcerting stuff, guaranteed to rile fundamentalists everywhere. But if you really want to plumb the limits of secular aesthetics?

Try doing this to the Koran.

## “Robert Motherwell: Early Collages”

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
1071 Fifth Avenue  
212-423-3500, guggenheim.org  
Through January 5

In 1912, Pablo Picasso started an aesthetic revolution by gluing a piece of oilcloth printed with a chair-caning pattern onto a canvas. Hence “collage,” derived from the French collar, “to glue.” Although the protean Spaniard remained in Paris throughout World War II, many artists fled the conflict for New York, where a Columbia University art-history major who spoke French befriended a number of them.

Through these connections, Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) met Peggy Guggenheim, who in 1943 was preparing a show of European collage. This idea of simultaneously layering appropriated content and serendipitous form into a composition with a single, pasted gesture was still unfamiliar in America, and the heiress challenged Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and William Bazoties to try their hands. Although his colleagues quickly soured on the technique, Motherwell became a lifelong devotee, likening his inaugural attempts to “making beautiful love for the first time.” Indeed, his untitled piece from that wartime exhibition is included here, a lovely concatenation of ink wash and gouache accents, ephemeral lines that emphasize rather than contain space, and — typical of the always refined Motherwell — a matchbook touting expensive Cuban cigars.

Subtleties abound here — note how green fragments of a printed topographical map in 1945’s *View From a High Tower* presage the sophistication of 1951’s *9th Street Exhibition*, in which highlights along the upper edges of stacked paper discs drift imperceptibly into shadow along the bottom.

If you thought you knew Motherwell through the black eminences of his mature “Elegy” paintings or the still surprising élan of his late “Open” canvases, this sterling survey will be a revelation: a youth unabashedly in search of earthy elegance.