HIGH-PRECISION PRISMS, the subject of large-scale photographic work in this exhibition by London-based artists Adam Broomberg (South African, born 1970) and Oliver Chanarin (British, born 1971), serve as a metaphor for the artists themselves. Just as prisms refract and reflect light, change a viewpoint, or create focus, Broomberg & Chanarin alter the way we think about a given topic by compelling us to examine particular issues. Their practice challenges the concepts and structures of power, using both their own and found photographs and objects. They investigate cultural, scientific, and historical narratives in which art and photography are used as instruments of politics. Questioning everything from modern conflict and biblical wrath to the very nature of photography and its ability to mislead, the artists shift perspectives, expose contradictions, challenge trusted systems, and compel us to face ourselves and our world.

This exhibition brings together two major ideas about war that examine the intersections of chance and precision, discipline and improvisation, man and machine, group and individual. First, large-scale images of fused bullets from the American Civil War—the very rare result of two projectiles colliding in midair—appear alongside images of high-precision prisms, alluding to the changing nature of personal involvement in conflict. During the Civil War, soldiers were close enough to see their enemies’ faces, but in modern warfare prisms for gun sights provide accuracy from vastly greater distances, granting the shooter anonymity and a diminished sense of personal responsibility. The Civil War initiated the development of modern military tactics. While the earliest battles, like Manassas, Virginia, drew interested spectators, by the end bloody trench warfare was a routine form of engagement. These tactics changed how personnel operated and led to advances in military equipment. The adaptation of prisms for scopes on firearms allowed for increased distance from one’s target. It is this distancing from one’s enemy that is at the heart of Broomberg & Chanarin’s statement: from bullets colliding and effectively saving two lives, to prisms and their deadly accuracy, it has become all too easy to separate oneself from the act of killing.

Because all wars are under Broomberg & Chanarin’s scrutiny, they further explore the impact of evolving military technology in the context of the Zeiss Ikon...
factory in Dresden, Germany, which produced high-precision prisms during World War II. After the Allied Forces firebombed Dresden, a city with no military outposts, the Russians claimed the contents of Zeiss (including patents) as war reparations and rebuilt the factory within its borders. Broomberg & Chanarin have created a set of diagrams of some of Zeiss' prisms by incising them on small copper plates that have been waxed and smoked (the traditional method for preparing etching plates). While the copper suggests the materiality of bullets and weaponry, the surface coating carrying the drawings is delicate — heat would melt the images away — and difficult to read. The artists have rendered the plates both fleeting and dysfunctional.

The second concept looks at military discipline — particularly the role of the drummer boy — and its interruption via a bouffon (a character historically invited once a year to the European royal courts with explicit permission to mock those in power). The drummer boy was a symbol of innocence leading an army into battle, and his drumroll was the method of communication across the ranks of soldiers. In these works, the artists employ the bouffon to interrupt the order and discipline of the corps and to highlight soldiers' relinquishment of individual thought and self-determination.

In *Rudiments*, cadets-in-training with the United Kingdom’s Army Cadet Force (ACF) were filmed at a biannual, weeklong camp near Liverpool, England, in the spring of 2015. There cadets learn to march in formation, carry out orders, drum military rudiments or patterns, and practice maneuvers. ACF training also includes musical instruction in the drum corps. These young people strive for unity, although the film clearly shows the fragility of their efforts even before a bouffon enters the scene to mock them. In the film, the soundtrack features musician Kid Millions’ improvisations using all forty rudiments available to a jazz drummer (military drumming uses just three beats and patterns).

The bouffon ridicules the efforts of the cadets in the film, but in a series of 22 photographs, the artists expose her grotesqueness. This series follows, in number and style of titling, Francisco de Goya’s print series *The Follies (Los Disparates)*, 1815–1823, but is more visually related to Hans Bellmer’s 1934 photographs of a dismembered doll-sculpture, *The Doll (Die Puppe)*. In both of these earlier artists’ visions and in Broomberg & Chanarin’s odd and enigmatic images, the world is an upside-down place where even those with a moral compass are compelled into wrongdoing.

Broomberg & Chanarin highlight a set of mechanisms that lead viewers to question content more closely. They are provocateurs compelling us to think and discuss and think again. Their manipulations and juxtapositions allow us the opportunity to reflect on our assumptions and shift perspectives. These deliberate efforts, though, are merely a suggestion; they propose that we don’t simply rest on our previous assumptions. In the end, they grant us nothing, so we take nothing for granted.