

BRIDGE

Art/Literature/Poetry/Film/Music/Culture

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Industry of the Ordinary (Adam Brookes and Matthew Wilson).
Child's Play, 2004. (Industry of the Ordinary collect one hundred used toys and offer them as a sacrifice to General Logan.)

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INDUSTRY OF THE ORDINARY



interview by **MICHAEL WORKMAN**

Industry of the Ordinary (Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson) at The Globe Pub in Chicago.

Industry of the Ordinary: Bridge Magazine, Issue #17, September 2005
Interview with Michael Workman, Bridge

Bridge: How do you know each other?

Adam Brooks: We actually were introduced, I think, by Max King Cap, who teaches at Columbia College and had worked with Mathew on a performance of his several years earlier, probably ten years ago now. So we were introduced through Max, had known of one another's activities, became friends as much through watching soccer as anything else.

Bridge: Who are your teams?

Mathew Wilson: Manchester United for him and, unfortunately, Leeds for me. It was bizarre that we knew each other in terms of art by reputation and we sort of played around in similar circles, but it was actually soccer that brought us here. Which perhaps we don't actually want to admit to, but it's better than having been drawn together through trainspotting, eh?

AB: Never look back. So, it was probably five years or more after we first met and started getting to know each other that we proposed doing a project together. We had similar interests in a lot of spheres and so the conversations that we were having led very organically to the idea of trying out the idea of working together.

Bridge: What kind of work were you each making at the time?

MW: I'd been working for several years in a collaboration called "Men of the World", which had just finished. I was making public sited performance works, either through Men of the World or by myself. Working in Daley Plaza, having a hundred people simultaneously falling over, this kind of activity. Men of the World had been working a long time, so when that finished, and as I have always collaborated, I phoned him with the view to ask him whether he wanted to make a single piece. As it turned out we didn't do another piece for another year after that.

Bridge: What year was this?

AB: This was 2003. So the first piece we did together was in the Spring of 2003. My work has also been publicly located but never really as actively performative as Mat's work. Mostly it's been static public works of various kinds. Although, to some degree or another there is an aspect of engagement with a lot of the projects that I've done over the last 15 years. I've never thought of myself or had never thought of myself in such a distinctly performative capacity before we started to throw ideas back and forth. But it was the public nature of this that brought us together. The interest in public space. And I think also there was an element of anger at the current socio-political situation that we both shared. And we felt that while the work wouldn't necessarily directly comment on that or be efficacious in being able to do anything about it because in a sense it's effectiveness is illusory. Nonetheless, there was an imperative that I think both of us felt, and continue to feel, that we needed to do something for ourselves in order to address feelings of frustration. It was cathartic, I mean, the first piece that we did was more directly

political than a lot of the work that ultimately followed it by the time we became “Industry of the Ordinary”.

Bridge: What was the first piece?

MW: It was called Dropping a Hundred and Sixty-Three Pounds on Daley Plaza and it was done for Patriot’s Day and I didn’t even know there was such a thing as Patriot’s Day, but there is. So on Patriot’s Day 2003, we dropped a hundred and sixty-three pounds of white clothing on Daley Plaza. A hundred and sixty-three pounds is the average weight of an American adult. The form was kind of familiar to me—using Daley Plaza, using a lot of volunteers, using a lot of performers. So there’s about a hundred people wearing clothing that they removed and dropped, in passing through the plaza on the stroke of nine o’clock in the morning which signals the beginning of the work day. We didn’t have permission and it was an illegal act of defiance.

Bridge: Dissent.

AB: Dissent, yes, good word.

Bridge: After that first project you didn’t work together again for another year?

MW: Well, we continued to be in discussion. We examined what we felt went right and wrong with that performance, or in the larger sense how effective it was to address the needs both of us had in making work. We were certainly still working together in developing more clearly the agenda or the directions that we wanted to continue to work together in. But it was another year before we clarified this to the point that we actually went ahead with another project. We worked during that subsequent year on our name and how we were going to present ourselves. It was PAC Edge, the Performing Art Chicago performance festival that was the venue for the next time we would do a project and that was close to a year later. By that time we were “Industry of the Ordinary”, and we worked out, pleasingly for me, a different approach to performance than Dropping a Hundred and Sixty-Three Pounds on Daley Plaza. I had found it, at the time, too much like what I was doing up to that point and something that I wanted to escape from. I think its important to clearly state that we wanted, at least initially, the whole project to exist on the website. That the work that we made functioned as documents, but also the whole project could function on the web, on our website. We started to conceive of work being made that would fit into that kind of paradigm. The idea of coming up with a one line description of an activity to be carried out, an action to be executed, that would then be dated so that people could come to experience it first hand live. But then they would also be able to look at the documentation on the website and as the project progressed, and we did more individual actions, they could get and overview of everything that we were doing. The website served as a springboard for all of that. And this has always been an issue for performance art in general. Where’s the dynamic between the action as it takes place and the documentation? I mean, this is an argument that has gone on since the whole notion of performance art emerged in the late ‘50s. And certainly during the ‘60s many performance artists eschewed the idea of documentation having a place in it. We directly addressed this and felt that the documentation became part of the work. It didn’t matter that you weren’t there because you could see the evidence of the project online.

Bridge: So it's also about this kind of ephemeral project where if you miss it it's gone?

AB: Yeah, we go back and forth. There are certainly projects that I think are enhanced by having an audience and every action changes—Ten Commandments for example was very traditional performance approach that couldn't have worked without that element.

Bridge: You had to have people there to drink the water.

AB: Yeah, exactly. Just become part of the spectacle. Interestingly enough no one, or maybe just one person, actually drank the water as we stood there. People took the bottles home because I had sandblasted these little vials with the word 'faith' and that's what we handed out. We siphoned off the water from a tap underneath and filled the bottles, corked them and handed them out. So most people treated it like a precious fluid and secreted them somewhere safe about their person. Only one person actually consumed it while we were there. Who's to say how many people did that? So it's important I think to point that out. That it wasn't about slaking people's thirst necessarily, or we didn't know how they would respond, but for almost everyone it was about receiving something that they viewed as precious.

Bridge: Where does the name Industry of the Ordinary come from?

MW: We went through a very extended process of trying to come up with a name that worked. It took us four months. We'd quickly decided though that it had something to do with an industrial process. It had something to do with industry. The word industrial was really important, but not just industrial, but industry—the idea of work—that we were doing something, and obviously there's a certain poignancy to the whole notion of industry and industry these days because we are at the tail end of that golden era. Ultimately we draw our inspiration from everything that surrounds us, the usual and the everyday. The word 'ordinary' presented itself and it was just a question of trying to get those two words to function together in a phrase. The word ordinary has a very pejorative cast to it. It's not often used as a term of distinction. So what we were, and continue to be interested in, is to say, "Well, there is something that can be celebrated in this."

Bridge: Now, working under that very pointed title, or name, what are you as individual artists singling out in particular about the kind of quotidian experiences? Is it political? What lenses are you using?

AB: All of them I think. Certainly, for me and I think for both of us, there aren't limits. Anything potentially is fair game. Obviously, it makes it easy because we cast our net as widely as we can throw it. We share an interest in the political with a small "p".

Bridge: I was thinking of your Vote for Me project.

AB: Certainly, at various points we engage more or less directly with concurrent events that are taking place within the culture, within society. That piece was directly made in the run up to that election. We made a version of it in Arabic, so we have a neon piece that says, 'Vote for Me', in Arabic which is (says Arabic phrase) that's how it's pronounced in Arabic. I found a native

Arabic speaker and triple checked it to make sure it was correct. That was during the run up to the election in Iraq.

Bridge: The project you did for the survey that Paul Klein put out was interesting. Why did you choose to respond to it the way you did?

AB: Sometimes after we gain the initial impetus for any project, we'll investigate the following subjects: it may be politics with a small 'p', it might be religion, and one or two others. But sometimes we just decide to do something because we both think it is funny. Then, later perhaps, we talk and we work out whether or not it is something more than just funny. I think in that case I got the e-mail asking people around Chicago to list, making sure that their name was second and not first, who the most significant artists were in Chicago. I immediately thought it would be amusing that we would send out our Vote for Me image and see if we could get people to vote for us. Obviously, in the process almost certainly disbarring ourselves from the process. From the e-mail Paul Klein sent out, he said our work was disqualified and then in the text used a paraphrase dropping my name in instead of using Lance Armstrong's from an article that had appeared in the New York Times the day before. To cheat on something like that just told us was an appropriate Industry of the Ordinary tactic. Because everyone always wants to stuff the ballot box in popularity contests. Even if no one admits it.

Bridge: Where do you think Industry of the Ordinary is now? I don't know how you view this. If you view this as a project? Or, if you view Industry of the Ordinary as a kind of on-going device that you engage in. Where do you view it as in terms of whatever type of framework you are using in?

AB: Well, I think that we both feel that it's the uppermost activity for each of us in our art making. In the spectrum of what we're doing it's the most important thing. It was unclear at first how that would function. I continue to make other kinds of work, although my energies are going much more into this. I think that Industry of the Ordinary presented a really useful, simple, straightforward art making strategy to us. It's increasingly and perfectly reasonably taken over our entire lives, it seems. I think it is certainly primary for both of us.

Bridge: Have your own individual art works changed because of this?

AB: I haven't really made anything to speak of outside of Industry of the Ordinary over the short period we've been working together, so it is difficult to say. But I agree that the collaborative process does and should affect the individual, but we haven't had time to get divorced. Who knows if and when that will happen. But I too have not made really any work individually for about a year. The last individual project that I did was a project for the public art program in Chicago up at one of the CTA stations and that was a year ago. But the planning for that really was taking place just as Industry of the Ordinary was being birthed. I think that your question about how we view it and where it goes should include one of the more interesting things that have occurred. Without our instigation a number of other artists have approached us about doing projects under the umbrella of Industry of the Ordinary. They proposed projects that they feel are in the spirit of Industry of the Ordinary but certainly they are accredited. And so on the website, there is a whole area called 'proxy projects' whereby they execute the projects using our name

but remain as distinct entities. Sometimes we help out with other forms of support but it's a very interesting and quite new part of the whole project. A couple of our students proposed a project and so we underwrote the relatively modest cost of producing it, and another artist is proposing a project that involves application fees in sporting events which we are going to underwrite, as well as make t-shirts for it. So we in effect become corporate sponsors.

Bridge: But it's so distinctly different then the way any corporation would operate. They would go insane if someone asked them to use their name.

AB: We're happy to have the name out there.

MW: We're very keen however to have any proposals offered up at some point from women. All of the proxy projects so far have been done by men, so hopefully before too long we'll get a woman to produce a piece.

Bridge: Who are some of the artists who have worked on the proxies?

AB: Ben Funke, Greg Stimac, Blake Noah, Ryan Duggan. One other fact related to these proxy projects is the project that we instigated as one of our projects which was to ask designers to design a logo for us. We got twenty plus submissions. We chose one, gave the person cash as a reward we viewed as a job well done, and that logo continues—well—it's been incorporated into what we do. It will appear on these t-shirts and in other places.

Bridge: How much of Industry of the Ordinary has to do with a regional theater that you are operating in? Chicago, Midwest, that kind of thing?

AB: I don't really think that we feel in any way, I mean, obviously so far because of where we are most projects have taken place here, but one of the proxy projects took place partially in Florence, Italy over the summer. Another one was in Los Angeles. We're interested undoubtedly in moving physically, and geographically, beyond the limits of Chicago and the Midwest. We feel that the projects will stand up wherever they take place, whatever the audience is.

MW: I don't have any conscious sense that the work is Chicago-centric. We bring so many of our influences from England as much as anything. Your question could have been, what does being English have to do with it?

Bridge: Except maybe some of the voter issues that influenced the Vote for Me piece. Or maybe the inherent religiosity of the Midwest, those kinds of ideas.

MW: I think that's a fair point. I think the Vote for Me piece was—its target was very much at the federal level, not the local, but our interest in faith as a general subject in several of the works is probably informed by living in the Midwest. Perhaps we would have thought of it differently if we'd been living in New York.

Bridge: What are some of the sources for what Industry of the Ordinary is doing? What are your models?

AB: I'm not sure that there is one or several. We share interests and have our own individual interests in a wide variety of both historical and contemporary artists and practices. I think it's important to position or to make clear that we don't think of this as a traditional conventional performance art collaborative or activity. It's more than that. The work is made in whatever way seems appropriate. And certainly I look to someone like Bruce Nauman, and have done even before this project, as a model. Just in the breadth of his activities. The fact that he has never limited himself to particular media-centric paradigms that make it work. It's more about the sensibility that overrides the creation of work. We're open to, both of us I think, to influence but also are keenly aware that we need to be self-policing with ideas, and we have lots more ideas than we have actually executed. In fact there may be a project in the future that may be the dustbin of ideas, things that never got made.

Bridge: When we were talking about the proxies, I was immediately thinking about things like the "Learning to Love You More" project. They have a very nice website as well, they document some of the assignments that their audiences have produced.

AB: We were asked by Stretcher Magazine, which is an online art journal based out of San Francisco, who asked us to create a project in tandem with an article that they did about our activities. And so we made a project that asked people to write their own eulogies. Interestingly enough, after we set this up and started getting responses, several people who went to Venice for the Biennale this summer said that there was a very similar project there that was people writing their own funeral music or something. I can't remember exactly what it was, but two separate people e-mailed me and said, "Have you seen this?" And of course we hadn't. Undoubtedly, there are synergies that go on at particular points in time.

Bridge: What do you want to do with Industry of the Ordinary? You had just mentioned that you feel like you are still identifying certain directions, certain concerns. What is the next step now that you've had kind of a season, if you will, a first season, what do you plan to do?

MW: The most immediate thing, other than a couple of shows around the corner, is the book that we are producing and the launch on December 15th at the Museum of Contemporary Photography. Perhaps the most interesting thing about that book is, again, the way in which we've played with the idea of audience and the work and tried to extend it. We took twelve of the images, 12 of the projects with their accompanying brief text, and we sent those to twelve members of the public. The most critical criteria being that they weren't part of the art world, that they weren't themselves artists. They were outsiders. They could write whatever they wanted to and we would publish whatever they wrote immediately next to the photograph in this publication. I think there was a rough word count, but apart from that they could slam us, they could write about something else, whatever they wanted. We wanted to find people that had no familiarity with the project as a whole, so all they had was a single image and a single line of text, and they would respond to that and nothing else. It was a very interesting, and at times quite uncomfortable, process for us. And they came from every possible direction towards the work and sometimes interpreting in a not dissimilar way than we were, and on other occasions completely out of left field.

AB: While we continue to use the website as the primary focus of the activity and around which everything spins in a sense, both of us have a traditional streak. We like the idea of something you can hold tangibly in your hand. Which is why we also have been making objects that come out of the projects. We wanted something that people could hold, that they could take away with them, that they could smell, and they could smell the ink. Which is undeniably seductive, at least for both of us, and even though so much of this culture is moving towards the virtual, we still wanted something that people could slip into their pocket or put on their table and just have hanging around.

MW: We felt that the project had reached a point with the people who were interested in working on this project with us, where we wanted to put something of a collection together. The website, while functioning in that way in a sense, was not quite as satisfying as this approach. The book includes a CD of some of our sound work and this sort of thing. The interaction with the public reproduced in the book within a broader context, a broader collection, the CD, the sound work. I think we just wanted to bring our experiences into one place.

Bridge: What is the most critical issue, when talking about Industry of the Ordinary and the general public, what is the most critical issue that you would like to get across?

MW: For me, I think it's that there is the potential for art everywhere in our day to day experiences. There is the potential for an artwork in just about everything that I see. Industry of the Ordinary for the first time in my career doesn't seem to be a strained and laborious process. We can e-mail each other, a phone call, a joke, an observation and we'll make something out of it. Maybe it's a more elaborate process after that point, but inspiration seems to be everywhere.

Bridge: How much of this is about you two as friends? That kind of shared values and beliefs that you have.

MW: I think a lot of it.

AB: It's all in the context of having grown up in one culture and finding ourselves in another. It's not also as if we are neophytes to the States. I've lived half my life here now, and while Mathew hasn't been here quite that long, he's still been here for an extended period of time. We make our lives here, at least to this point, and are entrenched. I came of age as an artist here although all the things that have informed everything I do can be traced back to England, and to my experience of growing up there.

MW: We know that we are sort of outsiders in one sense but you know everyone is an outsider in some way.

Bridge: Is there a kind of unstated duration for this?

MW: One of us is going to die.