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Artist's Stories

In addition to the resources and links collected for CAR, artists from across the spectrum of visual arts activities have contributed their experiences and advice in the form of Artist's Stories. These articles help illustrate the varied creative practices artists employ locally and nationally.

Artist Story: Industry of the Ordinary



Industry of The Ordinary, 'Match of the Day 2'

How can art-making impact social and political issues?

We agree with Daniel Buren, of course, that all artistic practice is political with a small 'p', and that there are socio-economic implications in the decision to be an artist. But how can art's political and social impact be measured? Joseph Beuys would surely claim a central importance for the creative process in the life of the culture but Duchamp, one of our heroes, would measure such an impact in the weight of a worn shirt.

Are we to be expected to contribute politically and socially to the culture that has so effectively abandoned its obligations to support our activities?

The jobs of art and politics appear oppositional: It seems to us that art creates innumerable potential answers to provocative and fundamental questions, while the politician provides only simplistic answers to stupid questions.

Industry of the Ordinary (Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson) December 2005

Industry of the Ordinary talk about their working process in an Interview by Corey Postiglione, Chicago-based artist, critic and educator. The interview from which this piece is excerpted was conducted in Adam Brooks studio over two consecutive days in late July 2005.

Corey: *One of your recent pieces deals specifically with religion, faith, and the State: the Ten Commandments piece. Would you talk about that work and what initiated it?*

Mat: *We were producing a piece for the PAC/Edge 2005 Festival and we wanted to do a publicly-sited work.*

Corey: *What was that festival?*

Adam: *Performing Arts Chicago*

Mat: *Every year until this year they would produce a festival of performance-based activities. We, at the time, had been discussing or witnessing Judge Moore down in Alabama and his crusade to have the Ten Commandments sculpture that he'd had produced put into the court house down there.*

Corey: *That was bronze wasn't it?*

Adam: *No, it was granite.*

Mat: *At the moment it's being carted around on a flatbed truck garnering support for his cause. So we thought that we would do a piece in response to that. So we would transport an object that we had had produced through the streets of Chicago, between the Museum of Contemporary Art, down Michigan Avenue and to the Art Institute of Chicago. We had a replica made based on photographs of Moore's Ten Commandments sculpture, but fabricated out of ice.*

Corey: *And, then, of course, what flowed from this; the ice melts....*

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Adam: Yes, the secondary part of the work is that because the work is transitory, because even though it was a cool day, it was a windy day and wind causes the ice to melt even faster than direct sunlight, we found out. But we knew that there needed to be even more to the work than just the creation of this object, this facsimile. So we set up a system whereby we had a tap that was attached to the moveable structure on which this Ten Commandments tablet was placed. And, as it melted, the reservoir of melting liquid was siphoned off into a series of small sandblasted bottles and given out to the public. On each one of these vials was inscribed the word FAITH. So this became an act of dissemination and could be perceived as an act of generosity. As people came up and looked at this curious object that was, going back to your notion of the aesthetic, a very beautiful object, but very curious. People weren't quite sure what to make of it at first, but in very short order they were able to apprehend the fact that it was a version of the Ten Commandments tablets, the two tablets that originally came as a material object into the public's consciousness through DeMille's representation of them in, I think it was, the film "The Bible", right?

Corey: The film was *The Ten Commandments*.

Adam: Oh, the film was actually called *The Ten Commandments*?

Corey: Yes.

Adam: And what a lot of people, maybe, aren't aware of, was that in the wake of this film there was this huge dissemination of these Ten Commandments sculptures or objects throughout America. And Judge Moore's version was only the latest one, but the fact that it was placed in a Federal building set it apart from the other objects that were sprinkled around the country but were, for the most part, on private property.

Corey: This is one of your most ambiguous pieces, in which you had some people seeing this really as an affirmation of faith. How do you feel about that?

Mat: The vast majority were of the kind that you describe. That surprised me. I thought that we would have, perhaps, a more even split. After all, this object had a tap coming out of the side of it and we were siphoning off water. The presence of the tap seemed to me to be more than enough evidence to at least set up questions of the intention of the piece. Perhaps it was because of the beauty of the piece, this huge block of ice catching the light as it did and us wheeling it down the street. You know, art, perhaps this is what it's supposed to do, reflects the culture that surrounds it. We live in a culture in which there is a huge spectrum of people who believe in God (not all of them are Evangelicals or coming from the religious right, of course). But we live in a culture in which we're surrounded by this issue so, it seemed to me upon reflection, not surprising that most of the interaction that we had was of the people assuming that it was a devotional piece. But I'm comfortable with that. There were a smattering of people who took the opposing view but, you know, the artwork isn't making a single, one-line statement. It sets up somewhere in the middle of an issue and asks questions. The interaction is part of the reason why we make art instead of writing editorials.

Corey: There is that interesting story about the ice fabricator...

Mat: Perhaps the most profound response to the piece was from the fabricator, who we call Phil the Ice (this is a pseudonym for reasons of anonymity). When we first met and hired him to create the sculpture, he had confided in us that he was trying to quit drinking. After we completed the piece and had returned the equipment he revealed that the piece had had such an effect on him that he had successfully, he believed, quit drinking. And that this piece and what he saw as its intention were enough to have him make a life altering decision.

Corey: I think it's interesting that in one of the photos on your website of Mat pushing the cart with the ice sculpture he's wearing a slicker that looks sort of like a monk's cape with a hood and Mat also has a shaved head. So there was that association and, also, this idea of transformation, that there's something similar to the Catholic Mass where something is actually being transformed. Now it becomes this liquid. It's sort of as if you were bringing Lourdes to the people on a little pushcart. So I think that that probably contributed to some people reading this as, you know, some really devotional piece.

Mat: Well, the ponchos that we wore in that piece were actually a consequence ... we've worn costumes, some more elaborate than others in a variety of different pieces, there is a conscious decision making process, we talk in advance about what we should wear, how we should appear. In this case, given the time of year we just thought that the weather might not cooperate, so we should wear something that was waterproof and these ponchos seemed an appropriate choice. So we stenciled *Industry of the Ordinary* on the back of them. They are, in fact, Vietnam-era ponchos.

Adam: Army surplus.

Mat: Yes, army surplus. The connection, however, to our looking like monks was

certainly not part of our thinking at the time.

Corey: Let's return for a moment to the Ten Commandments piece. What problem do you have with the Ten Commandments per se? Are they not the basis for a lot of our laws?

Adam: I think that it's the literal absorption of these texts as the final word about morality. And the fact that there's a presupposition that to be moral one has to believe in a particular kind of deity. And the fact that they are used as both a cudgel and a gag by certain parts of the culture to say, "Look, we're right, and you're not." That "your views are not valid because you don't subscribe to the same kind of belief system that we do." And I think it's also interesting that the Ten Commandments in this case have become more than a series of lines of text but have been literally turned into a physical object that, more often than not, embodies other things than just those sentiments. I think that that's why we were intrigued by this particular phenomenon of the Ten Commandments becoming literally an object. Becoming a vessel into which people could pour all kinds of other meaning.

Industry of the Ordinary

Industry of the Ordinary were formed in January 2003. The two artists who make up this collaborative team, Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson, have long histories as visual and performative artists. They bring complementary sensibilities to their activities. Through sculpture, text, photography, video and performance, Industry of the Ordinary are dedicated to an exploration and celebration of the customary, the everyday, and the usual. Their emphasis is on challenging pejorative notions of the ordinary and, in doing so, moving beyond the quotidian.

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