



industry of the ordinary

Ⓢ **textbook**

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LINKS HALL

acting ordinarily } by SUSAN SNODGRASS

“[If] I was an artist and I was in the studio then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art . . . At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”¹

--Bruce Nauman

The epiphany described above by Bruce Nauman in 1966 not only provided the artist with a profound sense of liberation, it also expanded the parameters of contemporary art. Realizing the limitations of traditional studio practice, Nauman, along with key figures in Conceptual, Performance, and Land art, challenged definitions of art and objecthood by shifting meaning to process, the body, actions, and non-art sites. Working outside the praxis of established media and institutions of art gave artists freedom to engage audiences in new ways, among them the invitation to participate in the work's creation and purpose.

Industry of the Ordinary operate within the legacy of this well-known history. The work of this Chicago-based collaborative, established in 2003, consists primarily of actions and their residual artifacts. Like Nauman, who gave privilege to the everyday in his early performance pieces in which he would simply record the mundane activities of, for example, pacing in his studio, *Industry of the Ordinary* “challenge pejorative notions of the ordinary,” as proclaimed in their manifesto, in order to reveal the unexpected in both art and life. Their meditations on the quotidian take the form of subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, performances and interventions in public spaces, as well as physical alterations to everyday objects, ranging from newspapers and bibles to facial hair. These seemingly simple acts have political and moral resonance, yet shun didacticism for dialogues that are open ended.

Several works intervene in the everyday rituals of urban life. For the collaborative's first project, **Dropping 163 lbs: Daley Plaza**, a contract was issued soliciting respondents for “a display of collective will.” On April 21, 2003 (Patriot's Day), at 9 a.m., participants were asked to drop a piece of white clothing (together totaling 163 pounds,

the median weight of an American adult) on the outdoor plaza of Daley Center, the locus of city politics and government. While commemorating the first battle of the American Revolution, the piece also calls into question the liberties won. For a brief moment, normal patterns of movement were interrupted and later the police arrived, laying bare issues of freedom and social control.

Here, the amassed articles of white clothing – white symbolizing absence, cleanliness or purity, nothingness – make visible the average citizen whose labors and contributions to the fabric of the city would otherwise remain unnoticed. For **Current Affairs**, *Industry of the Ordinary* painted a **Chicago Tribune** newspaper white then mailed it to Mayor Daley, a mordant commentary on both the mayor's and the media's continued ‘whitewashing’ of scandalous events.

Industry of the Ordinary pay homage to individual rights and freedom of assembly in **Child's Play**, in which 100 used toys were sacrificed to the Civil War General John Alexander Logan. The toys were placed at the base of an equestrian statue of Logan that commands the south end of Chicago's Grant Park, the same statue canonized in infamous images from the violent riots that ensued at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. **Child's Play** speaks to the loss of innocence and lives, reactivating a not-so-distant past, whose

struggles provide useful lessons for the conflicts of the present. At the same time, the artists question the nature of monuments, and by extension public art (impermanence versus permanence, ideas versus edifices), a fitting examination as Logan was also the founder of Memorial Day.

Such actions, a form of theater as well as political protest, are carefully choreographed by the artists, yet are open to multiple interpretations; their success lies not in a singular outcome but many, and in the accidental events that occur along the way. Working publicly, whether with non-art audiences or in public sites, expands the opportunity for exchange, in keeping with more radical definitions of democracy, such as those posed by Claude Lefort, where conflict instead of consensus, indeterminacy instead of certainty are the true hallmarks of freedom.²

Industry of the Ordinary acknowledge Daniel Buren's statement that "all art is political," yet insist that their work is political with a lower case "p". Regardless of case, the political is always present if one considers it in Lefort's terms. According to Wilson, "most political art simply makes a statement, while good art questions and creates a sense of ambiguity."

p20 These issues are at the heart of works such as **Democracy**, in which neon signs with the words "Vote for Me" were positioned at various locations around Chicago. Created at the time of the 2004 presidential election, these words ring as hollow as they do free, and ask: who are we voting for? what are the choices? who represents me?

The true essence of public debate is found in **Ten**, made in response p26 to the national controversy surrounding the display of a granite sculpture of the Ten Commandments outside an Alabama courthouse. Dressed in military rain ponchos, Brooks and Wilson transported an ice sculpture of the Ten Commandments down Chicago's Michigan Avenue, originating at the Museum of Contemporary Art and ending at the Art Institute of Chicago. As the ice melted, water was siphoned into small glass vials sandblasted with the word 'faith' and given to passersby, functioning as aesthetic objects in their own right, as well as relics/souvenirs.

In the related **Faith, Industry of the Ordinary** asked members of the cd public what they had faith in; their responses included God, family, myself, nature, science, and nothing. **Faith** succeeds not in proving whether or not a higher being exists, but in bringing to light a diversity of beliefs and points of view. It also subverts – as does **Tender**, p24 a one dollar bill made from a pulped bible – the conservative rhetoric that dominates current American political and religious discourse in America (and the support structures behind it), where fundamentalism is the order of the day.

Despite the religious themes addressed, the artists' own beliefs are inconsequential to the works themselves, other than their faith in humanity to make its own moral judgments. A faith in art is too utopic. (Brooks has stated, after all, that "art is a useless activity." And in **Public Opinion**, the artists collected names on a petition to ban performance art.) website *Industry of the Ordinary* believe, instead, in small gestures and responses, those measured by the individual, not by the traditional paradigms of art. Yet a total rejection of the cultural apparatus is a bit naïve, as *Industry of the Ordinary* would be the first to admit. Working temporally necessitates the need for documentation, whether photography, video, or something more textual, all of which circulate within the museum/gallery nexus. *Industry of the Ordinary's* website not only documents their performances but is a work in itself, "an accumulation of image and text," as are the objects made to supplement the project.

There is also no denying the art historical precedents, of course: again, Nauman; Chris Burden, whose performances were the "acting out of an idea"; Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture; and John Cage's interest in chance and the poetics of the everyday.

Likewise, one finds kinship with the lesser known Bas Jan Ader, who once said, "I shall talk of things which are sometimes, accidentally true."³ Ader's small, but significant output, including performances/ videos of himself falling into a canal while riding a bike and jumping out of a tree, shares affinities with contemporary artists like Erwin Wurm, particularly his series *One Minute Sculptures* (1988-98), and the early works of Charles Ray. In fact, *Industry of the Ordinary* paid tribute to these three artists in a **performance**, in which they walked about the city carrying bundles of their own clothes.

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Outside these influences, the imprint of each artist's individual practice marks every piece. Brooks' text-based works, including signs, sandblasted glass objects, and community projects, address aspects of language, its double meanings and failures, as well as themes of freedom and political process. Wilson's performances are based on aspects of public and private ritual, and in his previous collaboration *Men of the World*, he explored issues of intimacy and trust in street-level actions. Together they share a minimalist aesthetic, and more importantly, a healthy skepticism and sense of humor. When combined, it becomes *Industry of the Ordinary*, a forum for aesthetic and social inquiry that celebrates randomness and the everyday.

notes

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from the accompanying interview or in conversation with the artists.

1. Bruce Nauman as quoted by Neal Benezra in "Surveying Nauman," *Bruce Nauman* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), p. 22.
2. See Rosalyn Deutsche's discussion of Claude Lefort in "Agoraphobia," *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 273-74.
3. Bas Jan Ader as quoted on the Manifesta 5 Website, <http://www.manifesta.es/eng/artistas/artistas/ader.htm>.

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