



ANTENNAE

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Truth.Climate.Now

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ANTENNAE

The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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Antennae (founded in 2006) is the international, peer reviewed, academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and contents are inspired by the concepts of 'knowledge transfer' and 'widening participation'. On a quarterly basis the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, *Antennae* encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, scholars, activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of Antennae's Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject, now recommended by leading scholars around the world and searchable through EBSCO.

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FrontCover:

Industry of the Ordinary

History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

Back Cover:

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Near Here (1 Microsecond) © Canell and Watkins

HISTORY AND FORGETTING

The manifesto of Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson, aka Industry of the Ordinary states: "Through sculpture, text, photography, video, sound 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". In this interview, the artists discuss the political importance of their recent body of work in the face of an ever fast phased world.

Interviewer: Giovanni Aloï

Interviewee: Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson

In 2012, whilst visiting Chicago during the winter holidays, I happened to stop at the Cultural Center. The exhibition, titled *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*, was a retrospective documenting nine years of work produced by Chicago-based artists Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson, aka "Industry of the Ordinary". The artists began working together in 2003 and over the past fifteen years have produced an impressive and original body of work designed to make the public think about politics, religion, labor, and consumerism – the essential components of most people's everyday lives. Their performances and object-based projects are usually suspended between the mundane and the ridiculous, the sublime and the deadpan; at every turn, they seem to be capable to poetically peel off layers of truth through seemingly simple but carefully orchestrated interventions. It might therefore not come as a surprise that right now, Industry of the Ordinary should find themselves more politically engaged than ever before.

Giovanni Aloï: Are there some specific contextual/aesthetic coordinates an IOTO work follows in order to come to fruition? For instance, I have become familiar with a certain humor and an

unpretentious aesthetic in your work. When do you both agree that a project has the right elements to become an IOTO project?

Industry of the Ordinary: The singular condition for a potential work to become a realized IOTO piece is that we both agree to its creation. There have been dozens of works that we have discussed, sometimes for years, before deciding that they are not sufficiently complete to merit being executed.

[Mathew Wilson]: For instance, a number of years ago Adam returned from a visit to Vietnam. He was very interested in making a work about the history of that country...

[Adam Brooks]: The initial iteration was to be popsicles in the shape of a bust of Ho Chi Minh which would be given out to passers-by on Michigan Avenue. Ho's body is publicly displayed in central Hanoi but photography is strictly forbidden.^[1]

[MW]: I thought that the piece would be too opaque performed in downtown Chicago. That conversation went on for months. It might



Industry of the Ordinary

History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

yet be realized but for a different audience.

G.A.: Adam was born in New York and Mat in Reading, near London, in the UK. What is IOTO's relationship with the United Kingdom in terms of cultural references and approaches?

[AB]: It's important to note that I moved to the UK when I was a year old, and lived there throughout my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Thus, we spent our formative years in the UK, although at differing, but overlapping, times. We spent the entirety of the 1970's in the UK, a decade which saw radical changes to the social order in Britain and culminated with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. She famously stated that 'there is no such thing as Society', a declaration that continues to haunt both the UK and, by association, the US.

[MW]: Although that 'special relationship'

cuts both ways.

[AB]: I came to Chicago to attend graduate school at SAIC in 1986. I was nominally in the Sculpture program but several faculty members had an issue with the fact that my final projects were primarily public text-based wheat-pasted installations that engaged audiences outside of academia. One memorably went so far as to question whether language was a valid material for art-making.

[MW]: I moved to Chicago in 1991 to attend SAIC. I was studying photography at the time but became increasingly interested in performance.

IOTO: Recently we completed a work as a consequence of being in England during the Brexit vote. It included video images of the tide coming in on Blackpool beach,^[2] (as the island becomes a little bit smaller) – recalling a strong childhood memory for people of a certain age.



Industry of the Ordinary

History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

We were struck in the production of the work by the generational gap revealed in attitudes to Europe in the Leave vote and a belief in some quarters that England (in particular) could return to the halcyon days of their youth.

We have deep roots in England and occasionally make reference to that in the work and while our primary impulses mostly derive from being outsiders in America with the privileged point of view that affords, we're now outsiders in England too.

G.A.: Is this outsider's notion exemplified by the contemplative nature of the work? The idea that there's nothing one can do to control the tide... The idea of contemplating the shrinking of the island is very poetic in its literal unravelling. But I also see something metaphoric in the idea of the tide as something representing cultural shifts, waves of ideologies that seem to come and go, and then return again...ideologies that sweep the

masses and have a major impact on the actual physicality of the land.

IOTO: Being an outsider puts you at a distance from things that can be very helpful to the artist. It affords a certain perspective. The video we shot was edited to isolate the tide coming in and inundating us. For us, the Brexit vote was a suffocating expression of xenophobia; a withdrawal from a shared future. The tide coming in consequently feels ominous as the ground on which we stand disappears.

G.A.: Do you think that some of your humor classifies as "British" and what aspects of a dialogue between British and American ways of being come to play in your work? I ask since I lived in London for twenty years and I often wonder how much of certain things I do, make, or say are informed by my years spent there.



Industry of the Ordinary

History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

[MW]: I've been told many times by Americans that they think British humor is darker and edgier than American humor. I'm not sure whether that's true, but someone once told me that Americans laugh at other people and the British laugh at themselves. I put this to an English friend of mine once and he told me that he laughs at other people all the time.

[AB]: One of the bases of our collaboration is our shared exposure to British humor and the shorthand that allows us. A snippet of dialogue from a forty-five-year-old Monty Python sketch can be loaded with shared meaning. While it does not enter the work directly very often, this syntax can be divined by those who care to find it.

"Hegel is arguing that the reality is merely an *a priori* adjunct of non-naturalistic ethics, Kant via the categorical imperative is holding that ontologically it exists only in the imagination, and Marx is claiming it was offside." (Monty Python)

G.A.: Many would inscribe your work into the dimension of relational aesthetics because of the emphasis you place on the interaction with the

public and the stated intention that your work is completed by the creative interpretation and engagement of the audience. Does that label do justice to your body of work?

[AB]: Probably, although I believe that that term has lost some of its currency over time. If there has been a shift in the way that relational aesthetics is viewed, it is that it has become a convenient and all-purpose container into which many kinds of work, both socially engaged and otherwise, can be placed, often inappropriately. It is certainly not the primary motivating factor for why we make work. In general, we tend to respond to particular circumstances and occurrences in the world rather than filtering our ideas through the prism of theoretical constructs.

[MW]: I used to call myself a Situationist, but times change. My initial experiments in performative work involved public-sited interventions that would often involve dozens of volunteers. There would never be any signalling about what the work was about and relied on events surrounding the action to generate meaning. For example, in 1994, I organized 100 volunteers dressed in office attire to simultaneously fall on Daley Plaza in downtown

Chicago. They lay in place for an hour with no explanation. I was interested in how the accidental audience would interact with the 'bodies'. I stopped doing that kind of work with the advent of flash mobs because everyone just dismissed it as that.

G.A.: Since your practice is closely related to everyday life, some of your projects have clear political overtones. More recently I attended the staging of *History and Forgetting*, a haunting and meditative metaphor on the current political climate encompassing the national, local, and global scales. A 25ft long American flag made of sheets of ice melted as the recorded voices of residents, workers, and former workers from the surrounding area were incorporated in a 'negative-space soundtrack' designed by Lindsey French and accompanied by Katinka Kleijn (cellist for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra) performing a requiem. Where did the idea come from?

IOTO: Trump's campaign promise to bring back manufacturing jobs to the Midwest. The conditions that led to the election of the current President have existed in America for many years. Our work has, from the beginning, addressed the socio-political climate that resulted in Trump's election.

G.A.: How did the collaboration with Lindsey French and Katinka Kleijn unfold?

IOTO: We have worked with Katinka before — the opportunity to collaborate with a world-class musician who sympathises with our work has been a privilege. Lindsey worked with us here for the first time.^[3] Her work often includes the collection and re-representation of data, so we were interested in her take on how to register and represent our (both IOTO's and Katinka's) presence in the space, as well as the presentation of the voices of our interviewees. Katinka was asked to play only the cello parts from a symphony of her choice (which turned out to be both Bruckner's 4th and 9th), and Lindsey projected fragments of the interviews we made with members of the community who have a connection to the space onto the walls of the space itself. We hope to work with both of them again.

G.A.: *History and Forgetting* had a solemnity to it — its kinetic dimension invited a sense of unredeemable demise, a haunting feeling of impending loss grounded in the material permutations involved in the rawness of the exhibiting space. From sound to silence, light to darkness, and water to ice, everything seemed precariously situated at a slippage point between fact and fiction and past and present. How did the concept for the project develop?

IOTO: Solemnity is a good word. We wanted to make the space a critical component in the work and speak about its effect on the senses. Aristotle's famous quote, 'nothing enters the mind but through the medium of the senses' was an important impulse and we compared the space to a sacred place on many occasions during the planning stages.

There also was an airborne component to the project...

IOTO: The day's physical work in the space at Silent Funny was framed at sunrise and sunset by two aerial banners being flown over the City of Chicago.^[4] This expanded the work to a much larger audience, despite the fact that almost all of the thousands of witnesses were not aware of the connection. The two phrases: 'We are Responsible' and 'We are Not Responsible' are references to a corporate legal disclaimer that we borrowed from Grolsch Beer. We have to own what is happening right now.

G.A.: *History and Forgetting* is an intriguing title —it inscribes an interesting contradiction that nonetheless appears uncannily relevant to the times we live in. How did the title for this project come about?

IOTO: The title is a reference to Milan Kundera's line, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting". It has always been true of totalitarian states that history is edited, rewritten or erased. It then becomes the responsibility of the citizenry to remember. There are numerous examples of this kind of strategy being employed in America right now. Perhaps the most egregious examples are on



Industry of the Ordinary
History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

climate change and the institutionalisation of climate denial - and the NFL protests over police brutality and the subsequent attempt in right-wing media to shift the target of those protests to the flag, patriotism and the military.

G.A.: Through the performance, you unpacked and positioned on the ground rectangular ice sheets and star-cut ice blocks. There was a specific point in the performance at which the American flag begins to emerge from the composition. Seeing the flag on the floor reminded me of a controversy that took place at SAIC in 1989. It was Dread Scott's *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* Scott set up the installation as an invitation for audience participation. It comprised a photomontage (the montage consists of pictures of South Korean students burning US flags holding signs and flag-draped coffins in a troop transport; text printed on the photo montage that read

text printed on the photo montage that read "What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?", books (originally with blank pages) on a shelf, ink pens, and a 3'x5' American flag on the ground. The audience was encouraged to write responses to the question "What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?" As they did so, they had the opportunity to stand on the flag as they wrote their response. When this work was displayed at SAIC, thousands of people filled hundreds of pages with responses. The positioning of the flag on the floor and the imposition to step on it in order to write in the book and hence gain one's voice was for many a revelatory moment of self-awareness. It posed questions about the value of patriotism and ones' own desire or necessity to identify with pre-encoded and shared social values. Veterans and their supporters accepted the invitation, not only by writing in the books but by lifting the flag from the floor, folding it and placing it on the shelf. Although a few viewers



Industry of the Ordinary
History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Andrea Bauer © Industry of the Ordinary

unfolded it and put it back on the floor...

The audience was able to explore the positive and negative spaces of the flag as they merged into each other and yet, walking on this was simultaneously enabled and denied. What can you tell us about the positioning and building of your flag?

IOTO: The ice was cut with the dimensions of the floor in mind. It was important that if the audience wanted to move through the space they would have to navigate through the flag. On close inspection, the nuances of the concrete floor were visible through the ice and as it melted dust was carried on a film that sat on the forming puddles. Obviously, to view this, the audience had to be on or in the flag. In this way, the audience completed the sculpture as an interactive and kinetic object and terrain to navigate. We knew that the natural beauty of the sculpted ice would lure the audience in - especially after our departure - then make use of their phones to photograph

details and take selfies. This would 'deconstruct' the flag as a unified symbol and give them a type of ownership. There is a sense of powerlessness to be found in many people living in the most powerful country in the world.

G.A.: Whilst Scott's flag could be moved around by visitors, yours was, in essence, destined to disappear despite anyone's effort to prevent it from doing so. The presence of ice clearly seemed to imply references to climate change and melting glaciers. But it seemed to me that much more was melting in the metaphorical dimension of this work. Am I right?

IOTO: The use of ice goes back to a work from 2005, entitled *TEN*.^[5] We had a copy of the Ten Commandments constructed out of ice in response to Roy Moore's campaign in Alabama to place the Ten Commandments in the Supreme Court building in Birmingham. Moore



Industry of the Ordinary

History and Forgetting, performance. Sept 16th, 2017 at Silent Funny, Chicago. Photo: Ji Yang © Industry of the Ordinary

was, at the time, the Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. He was thrown out of office for refusing to remove the monument. His *Ten Commandments* sculpture was made of granite, of course, and his gesture was part of his, and many others', the insistence that America was founded specifically as a Christian nation. (There's a deep irony in the fact that his sculpture was based not on any historical artifact, but on the film *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston). Granite is permanent, unmoving, obstinate. Our interest was in the temporariness of our object and the nature of faith itself. Humans engage in acts of faith throughout their lives whether it's about a god or not. But our faith is always slipping away, changing, transforming. It has to be nurtured, held on to, rebuilt as we're tested. We need to believe in something. In America, schoolchildren pledge allegiance to the flag every morning as if to a fixed set of ideas and ideals - but to us, America is a transitional state.

G.A.: What is the most troubling aspect of contemporary society addressed in *History and Forgetting*?

IOTO: There is an assault on facts, history, and science taking place in America as we speak. People think that personal opinion is more important than actual facts. History and scientific truths are lost when we forget our responsibility to preserve or understand them - especially as there are those who would actively rewrite or ignore them in service of their agenda.

While our flag disappeared and turned to water it washed the factory floor. Embedded in that floor was the very DNA of the workers who once occupied it. We have all been complicit in their removal since the neoliberal revolution in the early '80's. All for 10 cents off at Walmart.

G.A.: Your flag also reminded me of Jasper Johns's paintings of American flags and his essentialist questions about the nature of the flag as an object or symbol, but also as a repository of identity, dreams, ambitions, and values –the tangibility of everyday lives appears somewhat encoded in the abstract symbolisms, the stars, and stripes that compose the equally abstract motive. Do you see your flag as in dialogue with previous ones that have controversially populated the history of American art?

IOTO: Both Scott's and John's use of the flag, along with David Hammons's, Robert Rauschenberg's, Barbara Kruger's and others, hover in the background of this work.

[AB]: The first performative work that I made, in 1990, long before IOTO, involved a series of projections of American flags made up of the 'Seven Dirty Words' that George Carlin used as the basis of one of his riffs about the hypocrisy of the State. These were accompanied by a recitation of Supreme Court case law governing Freedom of Speech.^[6]

[MW]: I choreographed a performance in 1994 titled 'Contract with America' after the Republicans took back control of Congress during the Clinton Administration.^[7] The performance involved organising 100 volunteers to wave a white handkerchief at the empty horizon while standing at the end of Chicago's Navy Pier. Much of what we are living through under the Trump administration has its roots in the platform the party ran on in that midterm election. While my work at that time was not as overtly political as Adam's example, it was often initiated by a deep personal connection to the political debate.

G.A.: I saw you unpacking the blocks of ice right in the exhibiting space, as part of the performance. What technical challenges did the project entail?

IOTO: The challenges were more physical than technical although as with any site-specific installation, the dimensions of the space required careful planning for the number and size of the ice components). The ice blocks

weighed about 70 pounds each, and there were two in each box. They were also very awkward to handle and there was some discussion beforehand as to whether we would be able to complete the task without injuring ourselves. (We made it very clear that we were not to be helped under these circumstances and our failure would constitute the work).

G.A.: How important was it for this process to be part of the piece?

IOTO: [As for unpacking the boxes as part of the performance] We wanted to insist on the visibility of the labor and make the work as untheatrical as possible.

G.A.: This is a very interesting aspect of the performance: the desire to resist theatricality. Is this related to a postmodernist conception of theatricality that might be at odds with the realist dimension inscribed in the work?

IOTO: Yes, but also our backgrounds are in photography and sculpture, not theater. We have no interest in acting. In this instance, we didn't want to symbolically perform the labor - we wanted the drama to come from the effect that labor had on us. What Marina Abramovic has called 'Body Drama'.

G.A.: Why was it necessary for the audience to see the construction of the flag? It starts to disappear the moment the first block is laid down and the cellist soundtrack seems to imply the 'death' or funeral of a nation has begun even before that nation is fully 'born'.

IOTO: It was particularly important that the audience saw, or had the potential to see, the delivery and construction of the flag. That the labor wasn't metaphorical. As two middle-aged men with failing bodies struggled, the pain of the bodies struggled, the pain of the construction and its pathos had to be witnessed. Additionally, we have talked about how the IOTO project as a whole will increasingly focus on the breakdown of our minds and bodies, and 'History and Forgetting' addressed this explicitly.



Industry of the Ordinary
Tourist, Trader, Refugee, video still. 2018. Photo: Dave Pabinquit
© Industry of the Ordinary



Industry of the Ordinary

Tourist, Trader, Refugee, video still. 2018. Photo: Cynthia Post Hunt © Industry of the Ordinary

G.A.: In your opinion, what is the role of ‘forgetting’ in American history and is there a specific dimension to American ‘forgetting’ that seems different to you from that of other countries?

IOTO: That’s a good question. Perhaps a belief in Manifest Destiny makes it challenging to grapple with, or even recognize, the sins of the past?

G.A.: More recently you have staged *Trader Tourist Refugee*, in which you re-establish a historic trade route across Morro Bay, California. As you have mentioned, this work acts as a complement to the *History and Forgetting* work. Can you tell us more about this project and how it relates to your previous?

IOTO: As part of the work we collected the four products that built the early local economy; barley, wool, dairy products, and potatoes. The overlap resides in an interest in history and economics but with a particular interest in the economics of tourism and the consequences of that economy for the rest of the world. In rich

countries, we tend to view the world as a backdrop for our holiday pictures and rarely concern ourselves with the consequences upon local economies. When our direct or indirect actions abroad have negative impacts, sometimes leading to crashed economies, environmental devastation, and even war, we ignore our culpability. The final gesture in this new work was to plant a flag that read *Refugee* on one side and *Tourist* on the other.^[8]

G.A.: Yes, I was struck by the simplicity of the flag and the impact of the flickering of the two words when they appear as two sides of a coin. What does your next project entail?

IOTO: We are in discussions to take *History and Forgetting* to other US cities and abroad. It feels like a timely work and the current administration seems keen on keeping it so.

We have also been talking about the recent controversies around Confederate statues. We are particularly interested in how easily they have crumpled when toppled.^[9] This is because there have been periods of rapid production of the monuments in US history, (both during the 1920’s and the late 1950’s and

early 1960's), where they had to be produced both quickly and cheaply. We feel these crumpled objects are a potential starting point for a work as they are so much more erudite than the forms from which they were produced.

Notes

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ho_Chi_Minh_Mausoleum

[2] <https://vimeo.com/190487240>

[3] <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/katinka-kleijn-daniel-dehaan-ryan-ingebritsen-cello-brain-wave-eeg/Content?oid=8417453>

<https://vimeo.com/89182528>

[4] <http://www.industryoftheordinary.com/html/projects-disclaimer-aerial.html>

[5] <http://www.industryoftheordinary.com/html/projects-ten.html>

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_dirty_words

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contract_with_America

[8] <https://vimeo.com/236498944>
<http://www.theblaze.com/>

[9] news/2017/08/15/protesters-pull-down-confederate-statue-and-then-really-show-it-whos-boss/



Industry of the Ordinary

Lachrymose: Losing the Sky. Daley Plaza, May Day, 2018. Photo: Cassandra Davis
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Through sculpture, text, photography, video and performance, **Industry of the Ordinary (IOTO)** 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.

Industry of the Ordinary were formed in 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. Their projects exist in temporal terms but have also been conceived to function on the web site associated with the collaboration, <http://www.industryoftheordinary.com>.

They have had solo shows at multiple venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and, more recently, a major mid-career survey at the Chicago Cultural Center that was received with much acclaim.

They also performed at the opening of the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009. <http://www.industryoftheordinary.com>