

FrenchMottershead

PROFILE >

Mark Wilsher

YOU ARE CHATTING AWAY TO SOMEONE AND THEY START TO LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER IN SEARCH OF SOMEONE MORE INTERESTING. YOU ARE AT A PARTY AND SOMEONE FORCEFULLY AND PUBLICLY CORRECTS YOUR POINT OF VIEW. A stranger brushes up against you at the bar. These might be three ordinary moments.

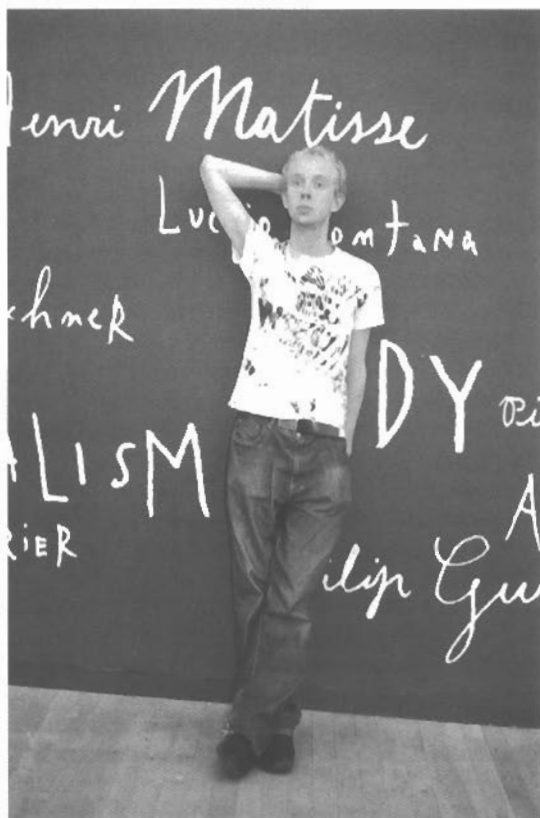
But they are also three carefully worked out and premeditated 'microperformances' organised by the duo FrenchMottershead (Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead), artists who make performance art without performing, who appropriate the syntax of self-development and audience involvement to quietly disruptive effect. The 'People Series' (2003-ongoing) consists of a simple set of instructions customised for the context of each manifestation. You are invited to pick an action to be performed at any point during the time span of the event, anything from calling someone by the wrong name to spilling your drink. The performance unfolds almost totally invisibly. But reality is made slightly different; certain situations are constructed as the microperformances play out.

Working together on a series of projects since 1999, they have explored ways of framing the micro in order to deconstruct the languages and dialects of performing the self. This kind of almost subliminal behaviour is their stock-in-trade. Where they differ from other artists investigating similar terrain is that the most important part of the work tends to happen internally in the conscious awareness of the audience, and it is often very hard to see their performances taking place unless you are cued in and know exactly what to look out for. Indeed, it is perhaps better to talk of participants rather than audiences because it is the sort of work that really demands active viewer investment and involvement to be understood.


Their current project *Club Class*, 2006, has taken place at Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial, and will also tour to London's ICA in February 2007. It involves recruiting anything up to 60 self-selecting volunteers as performers who each start the day with one of a choice of workshops (clothing, body language, bad behaviour and surveillance, for instance) designed to get them thinking about their own relationships with 'the social'. Expert stylists or choreographers work on the performative aspects of dressing and using the body to lead each participant to a personal understanding of their previously unformulated positions. These personal stances are then challenged. Or rather, by nominating each participant as performer, everyone is effectively given licence to challenge him- or herself by trying out some previously unthinkable behaviour. Walking out into the public arena wearing someone else's clothes, for example, or adopting a notably different array of body language is especially empowering because it is an experience rooted in our everyday interaction with the *polis*, and we are all equally expert at the essential syntax of these kinds of daily negotiations. At the first performance of *Club Class* at Tate

FrenchMottershead
Club Class 2006
bad behaviour micro-class





Your microperformance is ...



[When talking to someone]
Look over their shoulder
and scan the room for
someone more interesting

... then peel off a sticker,
 use it to mark the location
 of your microperformance

12
12
12
12

Modern in October, people casually posed in clothes that were, frankly, too young for them, and rode down the escalator handrails like naughty children. I came across one woman making slow head movements to the tick-tock soundtrack of an installation in a gallery, and watched a perplexed audience gather to watch for a few minutes before her friend came to lead her away. This particular event, although programmed by the gallery like everything that happened that afternoon, was almost entirely unannounced and unsignposted. The public might have read it as performance art, a prank, or the reaction of a psychiatric patient. Like the majority of these slight moments it inevitably went unrecorded. Although the artists might go all out to document their projects, a large part of the work

ultimately ends up existing only like this – as a verbal account reported second-hand.

The posed photographic work titled *Shops*, 2005-06, exists as documents of the customers of particular shops at particular points in time and as such uncover, unite and display some very different social groupings that previously would not have warranted such definition. For a few days staff are instructed to invite anyone making a purchase to return for the group portrait at a specified date and time. Standing on the street outside a pet shop, record shop, or butcher's, they are revealed as a real but fragmented community. The personal experience of taking part in such an event, however, is more that of solidarity and common purpose. These people are now able literally to see themselves as a community just as we see them. A print of each piece is permanently on display at all of the participating outlets and they reveal morphological similarities that almost verge on the comical: a pet shop has a constituency of slightly doggy-looking types, while the alternative music store attracts a rather sweet bunch of teenagers dressed in the commonly accepted signifiers of rebellion. Customers of the piercing parlour show off the tokens of their individuality together, and underneath each image everyone has been invited to list the item that they visited their respective shop in order to buy (dog chews, *Dark Side of the Moon*, clit hood and so on).

The best of FrenchMottershead's work empowers and confuses its different audiences in equal measure. The social is dissected and discovered to be just a set of arbitrary practices, techniques of the body adopted because they were 'convenient' quickly become 'conventional' with repetitive use. As an observer who knows that something is going on but is not sure exactly who is meant to be taking part, every little detail of every interaction during one of their projects assumes an unfamiliar significance as a potential performance. Does that person know that their underwear is showing? Was my polite witticism really funny enough to solicit such gales of laughter? For once it is art that actually achieves the popular ideal of raising your awareness of daily life.

For the participants, arguably the only real audience for the work, it is empowering to be given permission to be someone else for a while. Situations are constructed that allow a stronger experience of being present, and in a sense the work endures for as long as those people carry that feeling with them. ■

Club Class is at the ICA, London on February 24 2007.

MARK WILSHER is an artist and curator.

FrenchMottershead
 Club Class 2006
 body language
 microperformance

Arnolfini People
 from 'People Series' 2005
 performance instruction

Mark Hutchinson + Paul O'Neill (tape runs out)



David Burrows, as the writer
 11th December 2006 – 26st January 2007
 Event: Thursday 18th January 2007

text + work
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