

# Industry An Interview with Richard Kerr

**Randolph Jordan**

Randolph Jordan interviews Richard Kerr about his experimental filmmaking/installation project *Industry/Industry*: a subversion of the Hollywood trailer, and a metaphor for an energetic community of artists and their materials. Randolph Jordan spoke with Richard Kerr at Concordia University on October 18th, 2004.

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Richard Kerr has been on Canada's avant-garde film scene since the early 70s and has produced a large body of work in a variety of different experimental genres. Kerr's interest turned towards multimedia installations in the 90s with works such as *Overlapping Entries And The After Motion Picture Series*. The *Industry* show expands on his recent interest in exploring cinema beyond the confines of the motion picture screen. Having acquired a box of 40 Hollywood film trailers on 35 mm film, Kerr began his *Industry* project with an idea for a short film that would heavily re-work these materials. With the luxury of a new studio at Concordia University's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, he set to work with collaborators Brett Kashmere and Mike Rollo on what became a three-year process. Originally referred to as *The Über-Trailer*, the eight-minute film at the centre of the *Industry* show became known as *Collage D'hollywood*. The film pushes the aesthetics of Hollywood film trailers to an extreme level through high speed montage, multiple layers of superimposition, and extensive hand treatment of the film. Other pieces in the show include a dual projector slide show combining superimposed still frames from *Collage D'hollywood* and the original trailers from which the film was made; lightbox weavings for which Kerr has taken strands of treated

film trailers and weaved them into symmetrical patterns illuminated from behind; large scale Cibachrome prints of stills from *Collage D'hollywood*; and a silent video projection of Brett Kashmere's digital remix of *Collage D'hollywood* entitled *Hollywood Décollage*. The show runs from Nov. 4th through January 23rd 2005 at the Cinemathèque québécoise, culminating on the final night with a screening of the very finest in found footage filmmaking from years recent and past. Naturally, *Collage D'hollywood* rounds out the program and will be the only time visitors will get to see the foundational piece on the big screen. Both *Collage D'hollywood* and *Hollywood Décollage*, along with the slide-show and a series of essays, production notes, and other materials will be available on the DVD format Exhibition Catalogue which can be purchased on site.

You can view the official website for the exhibition at : <http://cinema.concordia.ca/industry/>

**RANDOLPH JORDAN:** Can you describe or explain what this idea of "industry" is? And why this is an "industry" project? What is your role in this industrial machine or industrial process?

**RICHARD KERR:** *Industry* was a title that was brought up three years ago when we started this project, Brett Kashmere, Mike Rollo and myself (being the principles). And then the team expanded to fellows like yourself. It wasn't until the end of the three years, when we had a naming session, that we realized what it was gonna be. We went through a lot of French titles. Partly out of a respect for the language and culture and partly to identify where these

pieces were made, because inevitably I will move on from here. None of the titles were working. So we rediscovered the simple word “industry.” And then, we went to the dictionaries to break down the meanings. And of course, in French it has a singular meaning and in English it has multiple meanings. And beyond that, it was sort of a zeitgeist title. Meaning that it sort of wrapped up what we were doing here. The project was industrious; we were working with industrial materials. And being a filmmaker of the experimental avant-garde variety, you live in opposition to this thing called The Industry, which is an oxygen-sucking wildebeest that allows no room for anything I am interested in, other than titillation and escapism. So... I don't have much use for The Industry. It gets in the way of my teaching, it gets in the way of everything, but it's there so I might as well not complain. So, it became a title that we could live with. We were following a bit of an industrial model in the sense that the more experienced person—moi—went out and got the money, defined the project, led the team, and was so fortunate to have collaborators. Collaborators who I've known for a long time, from Saskatchewan. It was a very industrial process. The title was a manifestation of the daily practice. We worked in different areas and towards a common goal. The sense of team work, and just in the sheer collaboration of the ideas. And, you know, it's probably exactly because it's wrapped around something so tight as the Hollywood trailer that so many people could input and move it forward. As opposed to if it was a personal film or something that was so internal. But, you know, this is public material. So any idea that was better than the last idea is the idea of the day. So it was kind of egoless in that sense. And the materials lend themselves to a certain sort of industrial process. We were using the old 35mm editing benches, Steenbecks, contact printers, and industrial chemicals. And then, of course, the last leg of it: it's spit-and-polished through digital technology. It's a good title because it has multiple meanings. And, yeah, there is a more metaphorical quality to the title that I guess everyone weighs in on... how they feel post-9/11. For me, way in the background is some sort of response to that malaise, that thing that everyone went through and had to question. And, for me, it's just: get up and go to work. Work kills the pain.

**JORDAN:** So, it really has been a long process. Let's talk about living with it for the three years, getting up and going to work. I mean, you had that box of trailers, and what was the first thing you did to jump into the work?

**KERR:** Well, the first thing that you do is that you look

at the trailers on a Steenbeck and you start to listen. I mean it's like that with any material, not just this. You just listen to your materials and you respond to it, you know. It's that simple. The first project was *The Über-Trailer*, which is now known as *Collage D'hollywood*. And it's through working that out with its a, b, c, rolls and on the bench and all that. The first inclination was to go Po-Mo crazy, because that's what a lot of the material was: Adam Sandler type comedies, and all these buffoons and whatnot. The inclination was to make something funny, sardonic, cynical... too easy though. Out of that same box of trailers I could have made an encyclopedia of Hollywood joke films, all which would have been funny to look at one night... and then put away. Another person would have done that or another person will do that. My interest is in perception and acceleration and the physicality of cinema. So, I passed by most of the comedies and the Warren Beatty love movies. I went straight for the rock 'n' roll, or the soul of Hollywood: the explosions, the gender bends, the darker sides.

Again, it's just a case of working with materials: ideas will pop up. Well, I just happened to have a 35mm slide holder in my hand one day and two frames of the trailer fit perfectly in there. Well, that's all I needed: you got another medium here, you know. You put them in a slide projector, project them and they look great: they're sharp, they're loaded, there is two frames. Once again it is responding to the materials. So it was a short hop to the slide show and then there is no hop to the motion picture weavings, because that has now become a staple of my practice. From there it seemed natural to decide on the three elements of *Industry*. One is very static and sculptural (the weavings). The second, the slide show, the *Demi Monde*, is another type of Hollywood spectacle: big images, hand manipulated, slowed right down, stilled cinema (as Bart Testa defines it). And then the third chamber, the third room is an accelerated reworking of *Collage D'hollywood* which is now called *Hollywood Décollage*. It's a pretty tight unit.

But I must say, I ran through prototypes of probably seven other objects and ideas. Most of them were eliminated simply because I could not afford them. This project will continue, things will keep being made because there is an image bank there to draw from. And, I can invite other people in and they can make another generation of materials from this archive bank of Hollywood images. I am not tired of working with it; it's really cartoon material. It doesn't bite you back like autobiography or social intervention. I mean, George Clooney is pretty harmless on a light table. But it is

beautiful material that is formally very strong, and there is lots you can do with it. The idea came together pretty quickly. It was labor intensive and that's why it took three years.

**JORDAN:** Do you think that your move away from thinking in terms of a single screening—moving your work off the screen—is related to your interest in trailers, which are objects that surround the films they are supposed to represent?

**KERR:** I don't think it's quite that tight. I mean, first, there was my waning interest in working in 16mm optical sound. I think it's fair to say that I've *done* my work in that medium. That ended in the early 90s, and then it's really been about opening up in pursuit of other forms of presentation, other issues of perception. And then, of course, there was the juggernaut of the digital evolution (not revolution). That took some time to think about, and I made some work just to find out what that material and technology was about. The trailers were purely a matter of practical function. After relocating to Montreal, I had no big money to make a project. I had a new studio here at school and this mythical box of fifty trailers. So, in the spirit of working with the material at hand, and what you have before you, it just kicks in there, and then the definition of what you're doing sort of follows. I mean you're working with trailers: that's very specific. What can be done with them? And so you do the big shakedown, and see what happens. In this case, it expanded from one 35mm film *Collage D'hollywood*, which was kind of a natural place to start this exercise in meta-cinema.

**JORDAN:** So do you think of it in terms of commentary on cinema? You're drawing mostly from Hollywood sources. Are you trying to offer some comment on Hollywood film or are you engaging in more of a participation with them?

**KERR:** Well, I'm not starting out with a set agenda. Though, I think that inherently in this material there's a certain politic, a certain reading of gender and those things. Therefore, as a collagist, I could only steer and shape, turn inside-out. I let the material speak. There is a rarefied commercial language in Hollywood cinema, especially trailers. It's a fairly limited perceptual language. Thinking of screen directions, its physicality, shot lengths, frame lengths, rhythms—it's fairly limited, but very intense. It needs to be torn apart. Pretty high-octane stuff.

**JORDAN:** You're feeding off that. When Cornell

made *Rose Hobart*, he drastically changed the feel of the original film, but you seem like you're more interested in amplifying the intensity that already exists.

**KERR:** Yeah, it did collide with a pre-existing interest I had in "accelerated cinema." This is the Age of Slow, so they tell me. My interest is in the giddyup of cinema. How fast and how physical? That's always been my experience and what I respond to. The earliest stuff I experienced and shaped me was by Paul Sharits, which was just full-frontal attack, but to me *that* was cinema. Tactile. You can feel it on your face.

**JORDAN:** Also, you're very consciously materialistic: interested in the materials and very consciously non-digital. In fact, you mentioned a few minutes ago that you were interested in figuring out the digital thing, but you're sort of defiantly not using that technology. In terms of the image there was no digital processing whatsoever. Did you make a decision to commit to the materiality of film itself in opposition to digital?

**KERR:** That would be my first response to any act of creation: what are the materials? I wouldn't understand how to start any other place. I mean, whether I was building a fence or baking a pie, it would be the first consideration. Am I working with good materials? What inherently do these materials have that makes them unique? And then, you work from there. It seems anything else is swimming upstream. I'm interested in the formal properties. I'm interested in the materials. I'm less interested in grandiose, indulgent statements. It's about the materials, it's about the process, and it's about making things. I have no great insights about the world, no more than anyone else. But the objects I make, I think, resonate with something that I'm unaware of and it lies in its material and its physicality somewhere.

**JORDAN:** The first section is very disaster film oriented, right? Were you thinking at all in terms of the materiality of the film in relation to the materiality of maybe even the Earth, or just life and its constant process of destruction?

**KERR:** No. I mean you keep trying to give me credit for being a thinker about this material, and I'm not. I just go at the materials. I mean the way that the narrative shape of *Collage D'hollywood* came to be, is I tried like fifty different combinations of fifty different things, of A, B, C... but at the end of the day, it's what works. I can't make something work that doesn't work. What works is when you put all the space stuff together, all the psychodramas together, all the genres, and you lay

them one, two, three, A, B, C, on top of each other. Because they have the same rhythms and pulse, right? A space movie has a totally different rhythm than a psychodrama or than a cop movie. So, it's their physical properties that defined it and then that made more sense narratively, too.

**JORDAN:** But at the very least, you thought about the form of its three sections, which are fairly distinct. You've got the space stuff and the disaster stuff, you've got the psychodrama stuff, and then you've got the really abstract, mostly hand-painted, hand-treated section at the end. This must have been a conscious move, from outer space to inner space maybe?

**KERR:** Mario Falsetto saw it in its early stage and his first observation was "from outer space to inner space", ha, ha, ha, right? I really have to reiterate, that with this kind of work—especially the stuff in the last twelve years or so—I've quit thinking, and just started reacting. Of course, I *think*; I have lots of notes in my sketchbook. There's a difference between crediting yourself as a great thinker and just being realistically open to the material and being sensitive enough to let the stuff respond and happen, and then recognize it, and not fuck with it.

**JORDAN:** And it's very much also a way of responding to and interacting with something which Hollywood doesn't really want you to respond to, any further than looking at the trailer and buying a ticket for the movie based on what they've shown to you.

**KERR:** Well, we'll see. I mean I have every intention of trying to get this to the States, and specifically Los Angeles and Hollywood. We're going to approach certain institutions down there. And it'll be interesting to see what the read is. Will they dig the intellectual play of it, or will they see it as a copyright threat? It all depends, it all depends. But I think it should be seen. It's a good take on Hollywood. It's a fair take.

**JORDAN:** Yeah, I see it as a simultaneous critique and homage. I like the way the two can work together and not really contradict each other. If you like the experience of sensory overload that you get from watching film trailers, then I'd think you'd also like to watch *Collage D'hollywood*. But at the same time there is a conscious pushing it to absurd limits. And these limits may end up becoming a test case for copyright issues.

**KERR:** Early in the stages of this I signed with a dealer in Toronto, and they were going to do a show with the

motion picture weavings, and some photography. And they backed down on the copyright issue. They just got too afraid. So it may be a problem getting it exhibited. We'll have to see. I'll push the issue as much as I can.

**JORDAN:** So you are going to expand on the *Industry* project and hopefully tour around with it and keep adding things as they come up?

**KERR:** This show, conceptually, can be broken down and reconfigured many ways. So the idea of shipping it around and touring it seemed rather natural. We'll see how that goes. Like everything else it takes money and hustle. And yeah, there are more things to be made. Sculptural things—all sorts of mutations of photography. There's another slide show based on *Pearl Harbor* that's never been shown. There are a couple unfinished films hanging in the trim bins that never got realized. The idea would be to build a studio around this idea, and bring in other people who work the same way. Because we have a great setup here at Concordia, where we've saved all these great analog machines, from stop motion cameras to Oxberries to optical printers. We didn't throw the analog out in anticipation of the digital, so I really like the way we sit in North America as a cinema school. Maybe we can build a studio around this concept and widen this circle. Certainly the most rewarding aspect of this show was when I saw it was going to get away from me, and Brett came in and collaborated at such a high level that if he wanted to call this project his own he could, and you came in [and submitted essays], and Adam [Rosadiuk] did the website, and everyone took an aspect and made something out of it. I still have lots of energy, but I definitely need the energy of the people I work with. I need the contact. So, yeah, I'd like to carry this forward at a community level. And there are some curious things that I'd like to do, I'd like to make. So as long as there is that core of energy, the work will continue. I'm seeing an incredible energy from this new generation about working with the materials again. And I'm very encouraged by it. We're not living in a total digital world, which I may have feared 15 years ago. You know, that digital revolution stuff was a bust—it was the biggest con that ever happened to young practitioners. And the ones that were smart enough to hang on to their old cameras, and learn how to hand-process film...it's just that the 100% totally digital world, to me, has an evil aspect to it. It all backs up to M.I.T. somewhere and some sense of military R&D. Yeah, I think there's a political point to doing this sort of work, this handmade work. So I hope that the *Industry* project can continue and involve more people, and expand, and get beyond me. That's for sure.

*Randolph Jordan writes about “Squalid Infidelities” in this same edition.*

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Randolph Jordan is a recent graduate of the MA Film Studies programme at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University in Montreal, and is currently enrolled in Concordia’s Interdisciplinary PhD Humanities programme. His research in the MA programme focused on sound/image relationships in the cinema, specifically within the films of David Lynch. In the Interdisciplinary PhD Humanities programme he is continuing his interest in sound theory and practice, combining the fields of film studies, electroacoustic music and intertextuality studies to explore how the complex audio-visual relationships that inherently make up cinema of all kinds can benefit from perspectives outside the realm of film scholarship. He is also a practicing musician and filmmaker, and is a regular contributor to <http://www.offscreen.com>. For more info and links to all his webpublications, visit the Assistant’s Corner at <http://www.soppybagrecords.net>