

# NONOBJECT – New Work New Language New Modern

Written/Edited by Billy Gruner and Kyle Jenkins



John Nixon. *Untitled, 2018*.  
Enamel on canvas, various wood. 37x25cm.

Kiev Non Objective's (otherwise KNO) presentation of new work in the ICON series on display at the Bulgakov Museum Kiev is exciting and timely. The aptly titled *NONOBJECT* curation by Peter Holm from Teksas Projects in Denmark makes inclusion of works such as *Untitled 2018* by the Australian artist John Nixon. This artwork sets a tone for the exhibition given Nixon is a master reductive art maker (both nationally and internationally) who shares a long participation with the unique coterie informing this commentary on the resurgence of a modernness in art.

Nixon's work is important not just because of KNO's recognition of serious commitment to practice. The influence of his oeuvre is profound and is justifiably relevant to anyone interested in how reductive art practices continue to evolve after the 20th century.

Noted for an unwavering interest in developmental and experimental practices since the 1970s, Nixon began a seminal engagement with monochromatic and constructive styles and influences discarded by an Australian art world tiring of supposedly imported modernist debates. In championing these lost artistic languages, his continued efforts have proved a genuine and challenging task to undertake. In short, the stand out quality of the contemporary art produced in his and the others in the *NONOBJECT* show underscores aspects of newer, more modern thinking today.

It is auspicious that artists associated with Nixon have themselves coordinated this presentation as part of an inaugural exhibition series held in the exciting city of Kiev, no less than the birthplace and home of Kashmir Malevich. Nixon's placement in relationship to fellow artists Kevin Finklea, Christoph Dalhausen, Kyle Jenkins, Peter Holm (artist/curator), and Billy Gruner (artist/writer) is poignant. As a specific international group they have sustained a unique bond within their distinct practices and collaboration on projects over the past 20 years. What is unveiled by the exhibition is a specialised circle of artists for visitors to discover individually or collectively.

KNO's ICON series on contemporary art dedicates the *NONOBJECT* show to this circle, a collegiate set beyond friendship. In the Ukraine there is a tradition focusing on intellectual groups and even though KNO is only recently formed, it is nonetheless rooted in a defining cultural awareness of legacy. Kiev can boast a grand historical arts lineage and KNO emerges from this complex historical backdrop long inclusive of radical arts groups and collectives such as the post war 'Mur' group (within literature) and in the realms of art and architecture Kiev's famous international artists and educational circle of Malevich.

Established in 2017 by Serhiy Povov, Badri GubiaNuri, Elena Dombrovska, and Tiberiy Szilvashi KNO seeks to engage with a current international network of associated art makers through collective exhibitions and projects. And what is genuinely exciting is KNO's inaugural series of shows begun recently in the magnificently refurbished 'Arsenal' opposite the grand 'Mystica' are now featuring events in the Bulgakov Museum, located further within the old city. This begins a necessary process to present and record the actions and works of a new and what I would call, *radical international set*. This 'set' is a large circle of practitioners, projects, and exhibitions forming a broadly based coterie now connected to the city of Kiev within a broader European and global context. The *NONOBJECT* exhibition, like the whole series of ICON presentations, is focused on specific intentions, namely to comment on a connected community and noted figures participating in networks active since (or before) 2000 worldwide. All the practitioners in the series, like those in the *NONOBJECT* exhibition, share another

characteristic - an interest in Constructivism as an informing legacy, the historical traction of its intermediate variants during the 20th century and as an evolving contemporary currency today.

A confirming point of KNO's program for 2018 is the recognition of the cultural significance of present day Non Objective Art (NOA) practices, as 'objects of value' intellectually and culturally. This is especially so for the exhibition *NONOBJECT*, where unique practices are redolent of a broader platform of ideas including the social engagement of collective networks, the individuation of practices therein, the public position of practice-led experimentation and research within culture at large, and as the curator notes, the expression of a new language with intelligible intent as opposed to a reflection on dated abstraction. The various groups exhibiting during the 2018 program reflect a refined presentation of a new model, and may need greater understanding, critical research, and academic configuring so that others can follow the distinct innovative directions taking place by the artists involved. Perhaps still seen by some as 'useless art' (as I humorously found out that 'non objective' translates in Ukrainian) such narrowness is a hangover from late 20th century theoretical discourse. It is with a clear focus on a select and individualized honing of language and a heightened sense of art critical responsiveness, that KNO exhibitions enact a conflation of such dated opinion into a form of political re-embodiment today.

Specifically, this implies a direct connection to criticality, theory and to a fresh *staking out* of meanings or intent. It further suggests that contributing language exists in coherent form in both emerging and mature practices seen and in as many connecting environs today on a global level. This claim is at once pointing backwards and directly towards known critical theory, historic timelines, grounded research and a required refinement of notions of homage expressed more constructively leading into the present day; as Nixon's and the other contributors' extensive contemporary oeuvres testify.

Further to this, each invitee's practices discussed in this essay are evident of traceable links. First they share a significant real life exposure to long-term criticality or toughening peer-based commentary of practice. Second, that discursive cultural process shaped their current practices considerably since the year 2000. What is argued is that out of a form of hard won (often independently achieved) successes and what is necessary to apprehend is that the modern discourse found in these divergent practices emerges from that same culturally expressed exposure, itself a renewed if not converse form of cultural criticism. Plainly stated, the artists all come from environs where they make work stating "this is what I am interested in", not that would succeed more easily. Just as the new century continues freewheeling out of an informing past it should not be unforeseen that new matters appear within current works engaged in such a working methodology.



Billy Gruner. *Bild - Royale*, 2018.  
Wood metal, acrylic. 60 x 17cm.

What needs to be opened up and discussed is what is implied by the use of the term 'radical'. Even for those with a comprehensive knowledge of contemporary art and of supposed clichés and conventionalities often discussed in Modernist or Formalist discourses, the question remains: How is a disempowered term relegated back into fresh meaning or reinstated in a post 20th century arena of criticism and accurately defrayed? This is to be discussed in relation to the various artists presenting in the *NONOBJECT* exhibition.

Typical for Billy Gruner's practice, the panel work chosen for the exhibition is titled *Bild - Royale*, 2017. It is both a painting and a sculpture, dealing with perceptual and physical space at the same time, while also being a monochromatic work referring to architectural planes, angles and surface materiality / construction. Made using ordinary materials from a hardware store, the work acts like furniture, or part of a construction, a fragment that sits between various modes of conceptual art making born out of Painting. It is a normalising of a now standard displacement of a traditional painting model - since the conceptually driven 1960s. However, in a form of masking or series of switched ideas the work tends to drag the contemporary painted object form into a *nonobject state*. That is not so easy to relate to, as it is always an object-form due to its flexible interpretation. As a work it owes a great deal to its series-predecessors found Gruner's practice called *Punks*. The punk series comprise a form of homage to music, sound, folk and maker traditions collapsed together inside the confines of the frame of the painting, sculpture, relief or architectural construction.

After working in the genre of RNO as an artist for a considerable period of time, like others in *NONOBJECT*, Gruner is also a musician, curator/organiser, writer and program designer. The artists co-presenting are also highly specialised in familiar ways. What is important here is the artists in this exhibition have each produced unique responses within a bespoke presentation of their contemporary reductive (as Americans prefer) and non-objective styles. Concurrently those by proxy appear to fit neatly together when seen collectively within such an exhibition. This is misleading not simply because they know each others' practices beyond the cursory, as well as others whose equally seminal post 20th century practices are recognisable within a specialised contemporary coterie, it is more relevant to claim they are exemplary by the engagement of their designs and intent.

Each artist in the exhibition shares a language of conceptual, formal and visual inquiry born out of the legacies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century where art and life collapsed upon itself within Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus and finally Concrete Art. Within these parameters certain artists, on a global level, have created individualised responses to seminal theoretical and visual moments predominant in the late 20th century. This exhibition demonstrates that the early fundamental marker points of formal art making are not lost in history but reinvigorated and often evolved through the individual and collective visual languages of the artists involved in exhibitions such as these. As such, this exemplifying exhibition allows questions to be asked, for example, is there a shared discourse of new language found in the developmental frameworks that surround the practices presented? This appears to be so based upon discussions artists and within their own statements.



German artist Christoph Dalhausen creates contemporary light installations and music/sound constructions, and in discussing the work *Unlimited Opportunities III* (2018) on cardboard this painted assembled object illustrates a primary point.

Christoph Dalhausen, *Limited Opportunities 111*, 2017.  
Cardboard, nail. 3.3 x 27.1cm.

That is, exactly how might we see contemporary painting today? With this asked, the work looks at what may lay beyond a dated figuration based sphere of discursive repetitions, which are now seen as classic narrative/s on modernist art failures, discussed extensively by American theorist Rosalind Krauss. On this, Dalhausen states “... the (work) deals with the lightness of hanging, flexibility, low colour tonality and reflection to the wall space. Light, colour and space relations have always been the focus of my artistic research dealing and playing with traditional questions like the relation of surface and pane, figure and ground, colour relations, but finding new and unusual solutions. My background is linked to modernist ideas from the Bauhaus time as well as to Minimalist ideas.”

The last statement directs us to the notion of process, making and physical participation, both within and about traditions that inform the painted style objects he makes. Given Dalhausen’s renown as a light artist and, musician, his paintings take on a third dimensionality. He notes the significance of a straight forwardness is tied to a set of cues for seeing the work, actual intent of the maker, and its object-like appearance in general. This is a work that sits quietly but asks you to you think, consider and ask, is it a painting after all? Alternatively, as this author prefers, operating in *a non-object form* tied to a far more ethereal positioning than the apodictic essentialism the minimalist era first mustered, based upon Donald Judd’s insistence on the viewer’s experience predominating, creating a break or rupture with tradition.

Dahlhausens’ work whilst not inspired by Nixon’s influence per se does come from out of a legacy of minimalist concerns and permits interpretive understandings to move around again, there’s no problem concerning other forms of defining actually. As a different seminal example from the same American minimalist period, the once disdained works of the female Minimalist Anne Truitt whose practice today is acclaimed comes to mind. There are specifications of intent seen in Truitts’ object works come painterly forms, but they do not confine the experience either, as once thought by her colleagues; yet they are works almost opposing by intent to Judd’s self evidentiary style.

Australian artist Kyle Jenkins’ object/painting likewise alludes to a work created from the construction of a previous conceptual intention. As such, the work *Leftover #1*, 2018 is reenvisioning, critical, and related to a post-conceptual frame discussed earlier. Importantly, the figurative nature of the work is positioned between deconstruction ‘as’ reconstruction, where the discarded leftovers from one work (a previous monochrome *Painting (Celare) #7* 2017) is now envisioned as a linear constructed object tracing and inhabiting space at the same moment. The curve in the work directs the eye more presently towards a critical calmness even silence. A simplification of interpretive value systems underpins the notion that at some point or another ideas eviscerate each other’s value, via shifts of cultural experience. This is relevant when recognised that any system of theoretical and/or philosophical belief may eventually fail to serve its intended use, as an explanatory idea any longer.





Kyle Jenkins, *Leftover no.1*, 2018.  
Wood, acrylic. 47x24x1cm.

Concerning Jenkins work *Leftover no.1* and from a new and intriguing series, the artist states, “The shape is actually leftover wood from one of the circular shape monochrome's I've been making. It is from a series of works entitled 'Leftover' where I re use redundant materials (such as wood, tape etc. left behind from previous artworks). From these materials I make another work and thus the materials are no longer redundant but activated with new visual possibilities through the process of reflection, reengagement and reuse that comes out of contemplating materials in the studio to make new works from. The residue and conceptual intention of the previous work is embedded inside the new work because the shape of the object 'as painting' is governed by a ghost-like conceptual presence of a previous monochrome, even though it begins enacting other ideas.

The physical cut outs of the discarded wood now become a way of activating the architecture of the wall and space they are installed within through a system of tracing perceptual space through a physical reality”.

The connections for these artists are clear enough, as their claims seemingly relate to an earlier 'critical post conceptual art' position, as mentioned. These bridges of thought relationally abound and where more constructive terminology such as 'critical post conceptual', once utilised from the 1980s by Nixon for instance, is a specific type opposed to more expressive terminology that fits. It is that discursive topic which appears quite significant to raise in fittingly positioning these practices. In shorthand, within this particular group of divergent artists, there are strong working relationships previously established during project developments specifically undertaken within the NOA genre.

These 'relationships' should be discussed in detail but in brief and for all in this exhibition their engagements date back to the very public closures, surrounding the thinking of the late 20th century period. Most importantly however, it is that same

frame of deep criticality about the 'subject of painting' at that time that has produced alternatives in art critical responsiveness. Evidence of this can be found in the works of the Zero Group or individually Blinky Palermo, Joseph Marioni or Olivier Mosset to mention a few. Despite how heralded these renown late 20th century and crossover artists are today what remains misunderstood let alone acquitted adequately, is what a new or alternative legacy implies to the growing arena of practices that they significantly helped to generate. In that sense the recording of the Icon series carries a meticulous on-going responsibility with it.

The art making of Danish artist Peter Holm and his *Triangular Piece, black version, 2014*, comes from a highly refined oeuvre that again crosses over, into, and through a range of disciplines while remaining contemporary paintings. Holm engages in local matters while abrogating the meaning of the iconographies defrayed in paint, here fold images, decals, designs, formulations, constructions, architectural reliefs all filtering seamlessly into an 'object like' painted form. In particular *Triangular Piece, Black Version, 2014* is a continuation from a series Holm states "...are outcomes of investigations on, mainly, Swedish folk art traditions: I adapt those into a modern language of painting, drawing lines to those traditions."



Peter Holm. *Triangular Piece, black version, 2014*. 53 x 52x 8.3. Lacquer, Mdf. Detail on right.

In other ways, Holms' artworks are musical in an a-harmonic sense. The 'forms' found in the construction or shapes underpin a movement about, around, and through space, like floatability. His other works have included painted car doors or furniture, high end in terms of painting and finishes that one would dare to sit on or touch; yet that is what they are for. Holm's collective approach to art making is able to inhabit both a fine art model of making paintings, sculpture etc. However they are able to also transcend their physicality by engaging in other disciplines in a shared construction of visual and conceptual intent. The contraventions marvellously speak of an otherness or as previously mentioned, a non-object state of fine art perception; a term used loosely here to define works that may look a certain way but act or are also intended in another way, through transition.



American artist Kevin Finklea using similar language states, “The works I make share a common commitment between other artists and share a further common commitment to polychrome object making. While our concerns differ, we all create objects that manifest both poetic colour and a sense of history brought to the object through the process of it’s making...hovering between painting and sculpture, makes us look further at painting and objecthood.” Regardless of terminology, Finklea makes painted wooden objects and further defines these resistant forms as essentially denying any need for repetition, homage, or reference at all, as he explores form and colour in a grounded way.



Kevin Finklea. *Souvenir For Erwin*, 2018. Acrylic, laminated poplar, oak. 22 x 24 x 4.5 cm

In discussing the work *Souvenir For Erwin*, 2018 the artist states, “I made paintings that significantly approached a state of immateriality. I needed to make things that were verifiable and tactile to counter the state I occupied. I had left object making for pure painting in the year 2000. In returning to objects, I realized the importance of making work as uninfluenced by past experience as possible. I made painted forms as directly as I could without narratives, memories or other past histories attached to the process. I realised this added the burden of expectation to the work. The pieces simply lost their fresh directness when I tried to bring something from the past into the present process. It was the freeing up of my work processes that this provided that galvanized it as my current studio approach. Materials from former works remade and remodelled became completely novel contexts to propel my interests in colour and balance”.

What may not be generally known is that many of the artists in the ICONS series are cultural producers, having opened and run specific NOA project spaces to the benefit of many. As such they have been primary participants within possibly one of the most unexpected drivers in art for academia to now attend. And what is questioned in this essay is that if a real movement has appeared out of the 20th century closures in painting and sculpture, and architecture as well, then who were the seminal participants and who galvanised this shift in a mainstream? For those involved in *NONOBJECT* a rise in engagements spoken to began around the year 2000, and was based on an international re-summoning of interests in alternative modernist discourse.

What has been identified by these same artists were ideas and influences dating to the early 20th century just as newer coterie have since understood it was carrying a massive cache of information and stimulus for any artist to reconsider, to be inspired by. It is this driver that to date has been virtually overlooked. And a significant cultural shift based on a process of advanced communication is now shared consistently between informing groups or coterie on a global basis, as it has been for several decades. Perhaps it's a movement of fans, adepts of reductive practices slowly gathering a much firmer understanding of a once historicised genre. No matter what happened it is that unexpected network of processes now resolutely linking current practice to fresh critical discourse and research on the subject field that interests and engages so many new practitioners.

If not a developing movement then what is it that led to so many people independently to continue opening a wide variety of specialised project spaces? Or begin professional practices therein on a global scale? If not so, how can unexpected levels of seminal experimentation within reductive styles of contemporary art and sound, media, or performances *et al*, have materialised or be explained? I cite the now closed CCNOA in Brussels and CBD gallery in Sydney, the original SNO and Factory 49 in Sydney, Minus Space in New York, Paris Concret - Paris, Teksas in Copenhagen, IS Projects in Leiden and PS projects in Amsterdam amongst many others as just a few highly influential and developmentally integral examples.

They remain producers of high quality non-objective art and reductive practices with the key artists that led these spaces, creating mainly non-elitist programs. They have been opened and run (most often) in a completely unsolicited manner within a rather dismissive contemporary arts arena, (as it was in Australia, America, UK, Europe, Japan, Thailand, as elsewhere since the year 2000, as it may be in Kiev today). Yet what all of these new and older projects seemingly share in common has been a unique art critical traction, a binding within their respective environments regardless of indifferences and obstacles to create specialized project spaces that engage with historical thought through the criticality of utilising developmental contemporary language.

What can be said surely and claimed is the art makers in the ICON series are contemporaneously radical even if that could be expressed differently or understood more thoughtfully, they nonetheless are participants of an informing modulation of known legacies they have been investigating, experimented with and engaged in heavily - firstly in the early 1910/20's, then the 1980s, and now again in the 21st century.

In closing, this essay is limited to the opinions of the writer, they are not those of the artists and they would most likely argue their own ideas based on what they believe in better ways, as it should be. However, what is apparent in the work seen in the *NONOBJECT* exhibit is that there are relational critical processes in play across practices, lines of thinking existing on a platform beyond the dissolutions of the late 20th century. To claim that it is possible to find your personal expression of new ideas and deliver those within an overarching framework of acknowledgement, and not result towards endless petulant dismissals while using the very same language to some incredulous and often poorly masked benefit to succeed, has always been a task. An unfashionable understanding likely, but one felt is currently being very carefully relocated within the intent of smart producers. It is a key marker or point of difference between close-knit practices within a genre.

The radicalism of intent is both an old and a new measurement that anyone can fathom. Put another way, if there is such a thing as new modernness as the English artist Deb Covell and Billy Gruner noted when co-presenting the recent exhibition in London at Saturation Point and literally titled 'New Modern', it may be necessary to locate that notion via a plainer descriptor.

In anthropologic terminology a 'transitional form' appears into sight within research of a spectrum, of any language or object/ness by example. An item that appears like the others but clearly displaying differences taking place is a 'transitional form' and those are extremely valuable bits to identify. The generic family of reductive practices discussed in *NONOBJECT* is in that way a spectrum, a topic, field, zone; each doted in many directions with their own transitional forms visible.

It is possible that in this one explicit sense the title *NONOBJECT* is an apt phrase. It is useful in encapsulating a definition of what may remain to be fathomed and assist in explaining the curious ongoing transition of painting into other types of object-hood, post and sound and light ness simultaneously and vice versa at will. This short essay has commented directly on the arrival of new work within a system that to date has not been able (or willing) to be appropriately identified by the contemporary art world nor the academic arena. This is all despite a massive worldwide resurgence of relational practices in visual art, music, sound, installation, new media, design, and architectonic engagements where a certain kind of artist (globally) with individual responses connect in a shared engagement of aesthetic experimentation and, realisation through a non-objective creative filter.

The curator of NONOBJECT, artist Peter Holm co-runs Teksas Projects in Denmark with Karin Lind. The writer Dr. Billy Gruner from West Projects in Sydney and editor Dr. Kyle Jenkins from Reflex Projects, Queensland, hold PhD's from Sydney University and all have been involved together within a variety of projects internationally since the early 2000s Note; the artist's quotes and commentaries supplied by the artists directly.

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