

On the occasion of the first Brussels Biennial, CCNOA, in cooperation with Brussels-based artist & curator Tilman and Dutch artist & curator Jan Maarten Voskuil, is pleased to present the exhibition YO, MO' MODERNISM... as part of the Brussels Biennial Off-Program. The exhibitions will feature the work of 25 artists from Belgium, elsewhere in Europe and abroad who investigate the premises of modernism and question and/or highlight aspects and principles of modernism within contemporary art practice.

The terms 'modernism' and 'modern art' are generally used to describe the succession of art movements that critics and historians have identified since the realism of Courbet, culminating in abstract art and its developments up to the 1960s. The term modernism is used to describe the style and theory of art from the 1880s on lasting into the mid-20th century. It commonly applies to those forward-looking artists, architects and designers who self-consciously rejected the past as a model for the art of the present, advocated a return to the basic fundamentals of art and subsequently created a new and diverse vocabulary. With the invention of photography, the realistic approach to painting and sculpture became unnecessary, and artists began searching for new ways of visualizing and thinking about the nature, materials, and function of art. Freedom of expression, experimentation, and radicalism became constituent parts of their artistic practice. They believed that art should stem from colour and form and not from depiction of the natural world. But modern art has often also been driven by various social and political agendas. These were often utopian, and modernism was in general associated with ideal visions of human life and society and a belief in progress.

Due to the complexity of the subject as well as the size of our exhibition space, YO, MO' MODERNISM... will be presented in two parts. While part 1 will focus on contemporary artists whose works explicitly expand on and refer to concepts, conceptions and ideals within the modernist movement, part 2 will present works by artists whose artistic practice is no longer driven by the social or metaphysical utopias of the pioneers of modernism, but have taken a rather extroverted stance towards modernist ideas, exploring and expanding on the subtleties of our daily environment as well as on popular culture and its constituents. Dogmatic and pragmatic statements of the heroes of past decades have been replaced by a playful approach towards art-making and its implications today, and have subsequently led to the exploration of other areas of contemporary culture, like sound, architecture, music, generic materials, video, etc. This has broadened the comprehension and perception of abstract art, its forms, functions and validity, and the perspective on the reciprocal transfer between the material realities of art and life. In addition, we have invited localStyle to compile a series of video works for our multimedia space. Léopoldine Roux will present a new site-specific installation in our project room.

On the occasion of the second part of YO, MO' MODERNISM we invited the Australian artist and lecturer JUSTIN ANDREWS to pose a series of questions regarding Modernism to the artists involved and subsequently to write a text on the subject. We would like to thank Justin for his superb contribution and the artists for their participation in this project.

More Modernism?

In a recent interview, I was asked to give an explanation of what Non-Objective Art is.

I was literally asked "What is Non-Objective Art?" ...as in please supply an answer. Now.

I remember being frustrated by this - whilst I knew I should be one to provide some kind of response, the question seemed very unreasonable to me; how could I possibly give a dictionary definition? Who would I be speaking on behalf of? What aspects of Non-Objective Art would I use for qualification; it's physical properties? It's conceptual premises? It's European genesis? It's cultural and political linkages; which ones and when? It's current practitioners? It's groups or dedicated spaces - the few that I know of, or the numerous others that I don't, that as a result of their activity may have received attention before either dissolving or restructuring to become something else?

...and how would I then re-direct this answer back towards my own work, to attempt a contextualisation? If such an answer was published, would it make sense to anybody? Or should I just try an explanation of everything that Non-Objective Art is not?

In thinking of my careful response, perhaps it was reasonable after all to say, "Ask a historian." Because thinking about it now, I've lost all objectivity here - I'm producing the material, I'm pushing an agenda, I'm working ahead of my own rational descriptions, acting upon an idea of an artwork that I'm constantly trying to make.

Later, I got to thinking if whether an answer to this troublesome question should even be in words. The resultant realisation was startlingly obvious - surely this is the role of the Non Objective Artwork itself? Surely Non-Objective Art, with it's concrete nature, it's materials laid bare and it's physical objecthood is the most qualified to provide some kind of answer?

Maybe the above thoughts could be a suitable entry into considering the Tilman / Jan Maarten

Voskuil co-curated Yo Mo Modernism 2 exhibition.

To continually re-examine critical terminologies, as well as the methods for historical categorisation, is a constructive endeavour. Within this exhibition, two terms in particular ask to be re-examined; Yo Mo Modernism 2 can be seen as a project within the development of Modernist Art, and more specifically, a look at some of the artists' works and ideas in relation to Non-Objective Art. The result of this curatorial project and the exhibition of contemporary art works means that the supposedly fixed category of Non-Objective Art becomes updated. This allows for a revised way of looking at definitive Non-Objective works.

It's hard to know specific things about the exhibition from here in Melbourne, Australia. But that's not to say that the ideas behind it are not close to me. Without even seeing it, already I know that there's something about this show that it's organisers and contributors know very well – that the condition of something is always determined by the hands it happens to be in.

What I understand is that there may be a dualism between the curatorial premise of the exhibition and the overarching agenda of those artists within it. The curators believe in the process of diversification and the potential for subjective interpretation within Non Objective Art, just as much as the exhibitors do.

The success of this exhibition lies in its offering of perspectives, rather than attempts at answers. Reluctant to enter into the act of past-tense questioning, Yo Mo Modernism 2 could be seen to be practicing a level of self-awareness - whilst it exists as an exhibition now, perhaps it has been structured so that it can continue to exist hermetically as a point in time, as a historical element within the development of Non Objective Art. Perhaps it makes way for another instalment, another notion of currency, some other kind of declarative forecast somewhere else in the world.

It's fair to expect that today's proclamations of the new very quickly become tomorrows past tense events. Given the transgressive nature of Non-Objective Art; the way the 'old' ideas resurface as it's 'new' works, the idea of chronology or what makes an artwork contemporary in nature rapidly becomes redundant. This dissolving of categorisation is a luxury, a freedom of sorts, a form of relative space to work within, where techniques and forms transcend time.

Whilst those in Yo Mo Modernism 2 develop their works in relation to the ongoing concerns that are particular to their own practice, art cannot be made in a vacuum. Non-Objective Art tends to be a successive exercise where the aspects of material development become points within its collectively

evolving syntax - a visual language, spoken by many artists of many generations simultaneously. The currency of the works in this, the second instalment of the Yo Mo Modernism series is no greater than those in the first. Perhaps it is more the cultural and historical contexts that separate them, rather than any generalist difference in the objecthood of artworks chosen.

In response to the question of how her work functions in the present tense, Camila Fairclough responds by saying, "...I think that a painting isn't really an object. It's something else at the same time. It's important today. In a way art is always 'contemporary', that's what the [idea of the] 'viewer' means; someone is looking at something."

What Fairclough may be referring to here aligns with the idea of the Non Objective Artwork's ability to encompass timeframes. For Yo Mo Modernism 2, Fairclough will exhibit, "...one or two paintings of different sizes with one or two colours." Perhaps these paintings were made with their intended exhibition in mind. If so, it stands to reason that the artist would have then been working in one timeframe whilst thinking of another...

Which means that the viewer would (later) stand in front of the works at CCNOA and imbue them with subjective content that may be parallel to the artists' own. The conceptual content of a Non-Objective Artwork is often left undefined, so that it may be the aspect of the work that allows for interaction between itself and the viewer. When Fairclough states that a painting is not necessarily an object, perhaps she may be seeing a painting as being more of a temporal trigger, a device used to evoke a response in the location specific to its own exhibition...if so, the painting then becomes a conduit to the contemporary, representing a current moment even if already receding into the past.

Exhibiting in Yo Mo Modernism 2, Karina Bisch also involves herself with the idea of continuum – as something to collapse. Within her work, timeframes are folded, producing works in the present tense by referring to the past. On this, Bisch states, "I accumulate, I classify, I archive, I reorganise images". Through doing this, Bisch shows how "...the Modern project, no matter [how] overworked it may be, is materially active through its own representations". Here, Bisch is inferring that to represent something is to update it...but to do this is to not necessarily state it's previous redundancy either. In this case then, apart from the material aspects of her icons-as-works, the manner of her handling of the information as a readymade form with pre-established cultural content becomes the work itself.

Rather than making works to evoke ironic response, Bisch employs a '...pragmatic manner of readjusting the Modern spirit', to produce the historical index within her extended art practice,

which becomes an “...inexhaustible database [which] ...nourishes a practice that is open to all forms, ...[allowing] me to make the less expected plastic combinations.” Rather than material properties being the primary concern of her works, it is the art historical collage-work of chronologically distant Avant Garde movements that become the materials used to bring her work to the current, thereby becoming contemporary hybrid works. It is in her words, “...a matter of literally rendering the images concrete, even if it is at the expense of the aesthetic and good taste of the object.”

Another exhibitor to adopt pre-existing constraints is Fergus Martin. Referencing the serial forms and systematic configurations of Minimalist Art, he attempts to create a “...celebration of the ‘folly’ of dreaming.” The word ‘folly’ relates to a whim, foolishness, absurdity or extravagance. Following these definitions, it appears that through this series of works, he is celebrating the absurd activity of dreaming whilst making these reductive forms. Furthermore, through reverse psychology, he may be asking the viewer to contravene the seriousness associated with Minimalism in favour of a dreamlike moment along with feelings of wonderment... all at the same time whilst looking at an arrangement of spray painted pipes.

Martin also goes on to say, “The contradiction of this feeling and [the] seemingly industrial forms excites me.” Whether Martin has decided to adopt the minimalist format in the first hand sense, or whether by using it he aims to engage in a level of criticism towards Minimalism – Modernism’s final reductive development – may not be a case of irony, but more interestingly a case for the difficulty of contemporary art’s categorisation. The artwork’s title is as humorous as the artist is genuine.

The industrial nature of the Pipe Dreams series is not in question, but perhaps the beauty to be found within them is. Within this series, perhaps Martin is approaching the complicated task of articulating the beauty that not only he, but many people find within an otherwise unremarkable object – formally disciplined and further developed via their immaculate presentation, but still fundamentally anonymous. Perhaps it is this series attachment to the real world, yet also its suspension via its impervious surface that lends it interest. When a work offers so little obvious content, the viewer inevitably focuses upon the way that associations are made in order to derive a meaning, and in this case even find a kind of tragic beauty within such modular forms.

An interesting link occurs between the suspended use factor found within Martin’s Pipe Dreams and Clemens Hollerer’s In the City. Both are objects that are somehow divorced from their original function. However, perhaps it is Hollerer’s work that aligns itself with the object that it once was, or

the use that it once had more closely than Martin's. Either way, both works offer an account of what they no longer are.

The interplay between art and architecture is a key point of interest for Hollerer. In reference to *In the City*, Hollerer has stated that, "Prohibitions dominate our lives. Rules are made to be broken." The floor based road works barricades that form this work – one of which is shattered thereby breaking their perpendicular circuit – make abstract reference the urban environment and the idea of passage within it. Hollerer's work also engages with the idea of transformation and the presentation of disrupted urban structures. Clearly, Hollerer's interest involves the experience of locating Art within the world of pre-existing objects; the artifacts that they become upon entering the gallery context.

The recontextualisation of everyday objects is a given tactic for contemporary Non-Objective Art. Again, a subtle sense of humour is at play here, as what first appears to be formal and dull at first sight, soon gives way into being a host for an open-ended array of subjective reactions, thereby building a sense of meaning. Hollerer's breached configuration also offers a semiotic entry into the work, making the once restricted space now available in principle.

Here, the dualities of the internal and the external, the functional and inanimate, inclusion versus alienation meet and break simultaneously. *In the City* employs a tangible bodily effect on two levels; one, where the viewer is aware of being outside a space, and two, where the expressive nature of the break within the work's continuum alludes to the physical aspect of its own making.

The artists and works mentioned above are details of the greater interest that lies within *Yo Mo Modernism 2*. Even from these it is clear to see the breadth of ideas presented within this exhibition. Interpreting these artists answers to my interview questions, examining the reproductions of their work and thinking of *Yo Mo Modernism 2* as an instalment more than a declaration has not brought me any closer to a definition of Non Objective Art.

However, what I can offer is the view that the work in this exhibition, labelled with technical terminology as it may be, is laden with the possibility for interpretation. Reductive as it is, the work exhibited here is certainly not in a state of reducing itself to the point of being devoid of content. The work exhibited here is very much in keeping with the way that each of its makers see the world. These works must be seen as the fruits of dialogue; of critique, perspective and response. They are indeed a commentary, even if on an abstract level.

The works presented here aid in the melding of critical terminology, which I believe is a positive

development.

Yo Mo Modernism 2, its artworks and the viewing experience are elements that occur upon a historical timeline. Modernism and Non-Objective Art are terms that are finite in nature. However, it is the continuing reiteration of these ideas via the artworks that takes the current understanding of these complicated terms into the present tense.

But only briefly, as new ideas have already come to the exhibiting artists.

Justin Andrews

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