

# SNO

## Contemporary Art Projects

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## Profile: Sydney Non Objective Group

AUSTRAL AVENUE  
15 – 29 September, 2007

Vicente Butron  
Lynne Eastaway  
Billy Gruner  
Kyle Jenkins  
Sarah Keighery  
Melanie Khava  
Andrew Leslie  
John Nixon  
Salvatore Panatteri  
Tony Triff

A profile is considered a side-view. It is a representation of something swung 90 degrees from its forward facing direction. To move to a side view is neither to follow the direction of the forward facing entity (to stand behind), nor to oppose or block its view (to stand in front) – it is in fact to *look at it looking*. The following is a side view on some history and some ideas that relate to an exhibition I organised at Austral Avenue, in Melbourne, 2007. This exhibition was itself a side-view of sorts, largely compiled from already available works by a group of related artists.

Almost ten years ago a professor of mine, to whom I feel greatly indebted, tabled a number of mind-opening historical texts. In a graduate art history course designed to encourage discussion about the problematic relationship between modernist and avant-gardist conceptions of art, the texts focussed on art's social role and how a rich and often treacherous theoretical terrain had emerged from 100 years of divergent opinion on the subject. One exchange in particular, between two Marxists, has influenced my thinking on the substance of art, though it may come as a surprise that neither text really touched on the subject of abstraction, let alone non-objectivity. The writers are Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch. The exchange was a dignified brawl where Bloch's championing of Expressionism was countered by Lukács's arguments for Realism. Lukács's criticism was against the Expressionists: "their language, divorced from the objectivity of external reality, thus ossified into a hollow 'monumentality'" of the subject.<sup>1</sup> Bloch's counter was to point to the fact that the Realists took an utterly conventional approach – in attempting to objectively represent the plight of the subject's relationship to capitalism, the realist artwork was not much more than a vehicle of representation, a political tool. Bloch's point is that the Expressionists *performed* the dialectical relationship within their art, creating a radical internal reality rather than seeking to represent one outside the artwork.

Twenty years earlier than these essays, in 1919, Theo van Doesburg's 'Principals of Neo-Plastic Art' proposed that the artwork be "an independent, *artistically alive* (plastic) organism in which everything counterbalances everything else." <sup>2</sup> Although the term *plastic* appears to have little contemporary currency, *non-objective* does, but only just. Historically speaking, non-objective art proceeds from the anti-realist dictum that to attempt an objective representation of the world through iconographic signage offers something other than an empowerment of the artwork itself. The point here being that art surely exists for its own function. An artwork should be a self-referential, unique and radical form.

This self-validating dictum is still largely the applied philosophy for contemporary non-objective art. Unlike Philosophy itself, the self-supporting proposition within an artwork is actually a strength. Though for the sake of further argument, we might step even further back and look at Cezanne's idea that paintings are "constructions after nature" formed from "plastic equivalents". <sup>3</sup> A contemporary interpretation of *non-objective* could proceed from a cross-referencing of Cezanne, Van Doesburg, and the Bloch/Lukács exchange. Where Cezanne saw nature as a given, Van Doesburg saw the built environment of human habitation as the persistent space – to be added to rather than represented. For *equivalency* means *equal to* in the strict definition of the word, rather than one thing subordinated to another through representation. Thus art cannot be a simulacrum, or implication, of some perceived external reality like Lukács suggested, but should in fact be a concrete reality itself. Cezanne I think believed this, which is why his paintings were like nothing seen before.

We are now a good sixty years on and at some geographic distance from these debates. Generally, one could even argue that dialogue around non-objective art has never had to overcome the Expressionist/Realist dichotomy because what separately identified both approaches was always effectively unified in non-objective practice. The same can't be said for the mainstream of contemporary art – the acceptance of a generalised, diluted and populist amalgam of what constituted these historical moments, and others, are used to deliver what is mostly message-oriented communication. This has much to do with the relatively recent incorporation of art schools into the knowledge-legitimizing function of Universities. It has not been a comfortable fit. As a result of this shift, the development of semiotics in wider cultural theory, and issues of difference and diversity developing within contemporary thinking have had an homogenising effect upon art in general. As a result generally formalist practices have suffered disdain to the point where they have even re-named themselves, in an exiled state, in order to survive.

With these sideways thoughts – amongst many other thoughts which I cannot discuss for restrictions of print-space – I approached the organisation of a modest exhibition. It was held in the front room of a suburban house in Melbourne, Australia, featuring a group of eleven artists, mostly from Sydney. These artists represent a larger community associated with the Sydney Non Objective group (SNO), which has become an Australian hub for local, national and international art concerned with furthering the dialogue around non-objectivity. Formed in 2004 by artists previously associated with galleries/projects such as CBD Gallery and MOP in Sydney, and the Australian Centre for Concrete Art in Perth, SNO does something unique in Australian contemporary art. A few members set up a discussion project, then a gallery, and is presently committed to the advancement of work that engages with the contemporary concerns of non-objectivity.

The works in this exhibition engaged confidently with the historically established terms of non-objective art as well as current debates. This said, there is diversity within the group that could be said to contain conflicting ideas. This is the heterogeneous climate that non-objective art occupies today; challenged both internally and externally, it has come to a point where, for many, the term itself has a question mark hanging over it. But this is healthy debate, and the term's meaning thereby provides a *context* rather than a *destination*. End games and reductive arguments no longer operate as key markers.

The works in this exhibition are self-referential and some simultaneously refer to other works throughout history, and even ideas beyond art, yet without becoming merely *abstractions* of these ideas. It is more about *performing ideas* through the making of the work. This quality proceeds largely from an inclination to move beyond the use of a single media in the production of the work, yet still retaining the terms of traditional media's greater dialogue with history. The term *plastic* gains

its currency through *medium*. Thus the inclinations of the work in this show gives contemporary non-objective practice a kind of condition that we might term *post-plastic* – expanded and transformed beyond conventional notions of medium.<sup>4</sup> Reflexive relationships to the conventions of medium are set up, which tend to occupy a zone beyond, yet tied to, traditional ideas about the plastic arts.

Introducing the exhibition is Vicente Butron's *No. 217.C, A Limited Action of August 23, 2006. A relation between what is and what was*. Located in the entrance hall, Butron's work is a sentence manifest on watercolour paper. The words are apparently made by applying vinyl type, washing the surface with red watercolour, and finally removing the type. The sentence reads: A RELATION BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND FORGETTING, AS IT IS BETWEEN HERE AND THE NEXT PLACE, AND WHAT CAME BEFORE. The moment of the artist's making, and the viewer's apprehension of it, are tied together through this sentence. The way the paint captures the trace of the removed letters foretells the viewer's departure from the work. Once the words pass the retinal gatekeeper and enter the mind, whether or not the viewer is aware of it, their body enacts the meaning of the sentence.

Opposite and slightly down the hall is Tony Triff's *Isosceles Green*, 2005. Though the work's title denotes its form, at the same time it is a painting of an isosceles triangle. Triff's work is architectonic – an active component of space, the painting has no prescribed top or bottom and behaves like an integer in any room it occupies. And thus, it literally has no fixed scale.

On the floor, in the main space of the exhibition, Billy Gruner's *Concrete Form No. 2* is a low-lying sculpture that has perceptibly employed industrial processes in its making. Here Gruner has actually provided a metal fabricator with an opened-up cake box to which he has made a few rudimentary cuts – making it a pleasing form of sorts. He then gives the fabricator basic instructions: cut the shape and make folds in the metal (where and at what angle are not specified by Gruner) and then enamel it with white. Size is determined by what can be gleaned from a standard sheet. Thus the fabricator is charged with a creative task. This implies a question regarding the artist's hand: where is it in the work? Gruner has provided a scenario where the artist's studio becomes an expanded apparatus that involves different creative levels and different forms of labour.

Also pursuing the potential of the expanded studio, Salvatore Panatteri utilises specialised, out-sourced labour and technology. In the design phase of the process, Panatteri supplies the fabricator – a laser-cutter – with instructions in the form of a drawn composition. Rectangular holes are cut into acrylic sheets Panatteri supplies, while the positive inserts for these holes are cut from different sheets. The artist then assembles the two elements onto aluminium panels. Each of the four panels making up this work appears as solid colour – 12 mm deep – but this is the illusion; although the white inserts are solid, pigmented acrylic, the apparently blue acrylic 'field' is clear atop a blue-painted rear-support. Panatteri plays a trick on both eye and mind. The blue paint he uses is called 'chroma-key blue' and is used in the film and television industry to remove a figure's background. This colour is not to be found in the human complexion and providing the weatherman on TV is not wearing a blue suit, he can be successfully isolated from the background and a map is inserted, as though it were actually behind him. Panatteri's white inserts mock the viewer, for these do not really float in blue plastic. The white inserts are plotted across the surfaces of the works in the way early computer technology's screen identity runs along crude grid lines.

Sarah Keighery's ongoing exploration of the ephemeral, concrete properties of foodstuffs is represented in the exhibition by *Squid Ink Drawing*, 2006 and *Sugar Dot*, 2007. The latter work is simply a brass disc, 70 cm in radius, which has a sprinkling of sugar cast across its surface. The sugar has stuck to a coat of PVA, an apparently invisible layer when dry, but is in fact a subtle, third layer of light filtration. The yellow tint of the brass, the glue, and the translucent sugar crystals combine to create a work that distorts a reflection of the room and viewer. It also becomes a surrogate light source itself, throwing back the glow of the window opposite. Like Triff's *Isosceles Green*, Keighery's work is without fixed scale, although with *Sugar Dot* the feeling of the work's space expanding and contracting is a result of reflection, as one moves around, towards and away from it. The experience is largely visual yet all the while the sugar crystals compellingly tempt a different sense than sight, daring the viewer to exercise their taste.

Andrew Leslie has a small version of his often large-scale wall reliefs that employ the effects of light. Light is a vital factor in his work. For over fifteen years he has used the simple idea of bouncing light from a painted surface. Partially concealed, the painted surface is the reverse side of a thin, vertical strip of aluminium that is bent, at a very shallow angle, up the middle and set out from the wall at about 50 millimetres by a discrete bracket. Facing the wall, the painted surfaces reflect the colour of the paint back onto the wall, creating a work that glows on its own, almost privately. However, the work is generous with the light reflecting out to the audience, and sustained viewing reveals complex, ambient colour in conjunction with the front side of the work and the white of the wall. The work in this show is less subtle and more demonstrative than some of the other pieces I have seen. A flat, yellow and blue component – one of two elements – demonstrates, like a schematic diagram, what is happening with reflected light in the second component which comprises two strips of the aforementioned bent aluminium. This produces the thought that the work has come bundled with its own nonverbal explanation. Again, this reflects a pivotal concern with non-objective art: the work is its own explanation. Leslie thus manages to coax the artwork to comment on its own identity, as a non-objective work, which also makes it quite eccentric.

The other artists represented in the exhibition are Lynne Eastaway, Kyle Jenkins, Melanie E. Khava, and John Nixon. All the works are of worthy of special note, however space restrictions prevent more detailed inclusion in the present text. Like the works discussed in more depth, the other pieces in the show demonstrate use of materials and processes as particular decisions made from many options. Some of the choices are: precision-applied bands of paint on canvas (Jenkins), paint on laminated sheets of canvas (Eastaway), paint on stacked sheets of paper (Khava). John Nixon's work, I discovered, is a paint facsimile of a tiled arrangement of printed invitations for an exhibition of his containing similar works. This work behaves like any other painting in its group, within Nixon's practice, until one receives information regarding its particular origins. Then the interpretation shifts. In this way Nixon suggests that non-objective art is like any other object in the world. It announces its own existence as being of a certain type, yet it modestly suggests that there may be more than simply surface appearances. It is on this point that contemporary non-objective art must argue in a complex way, for as history has demonstrated, when interpretations shift the apparent firmness of history itself is loosened up.

Daniel Argyle

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Notes:

1. Georg Lukács, "Expressionism's Creative Method", from "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline" (1934), *Essays on Realism*, MIT Press Classics, Cambridge, 1983, p. 110. The two other essays from 1938, by Bloch and Lukács are both published in Ronald Taylor (ed.) *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London, 1980.
  2. Theo Van Doesburg, excerpts from "Principals of Neo-Plastic Art," printed in Harrison & Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory. 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, 1992, p. 281.
  3. Cezanne quoted in Richard W. Murphy, *The World of Cezanne*, Time Life International, Netherlands, 1975, p. 77.
  4. The idea of postplasticity could be read as a reactionary stance if considered outside the greater dialogue of postformalism. For an in-depth look at this current within Australian art, see Billy Gruner's essay on the subject *Post-Formalism In Recent Australian Art* co-published by SNO Contemporary Art Projects and Minus Space. The essay was published on the occasion of *Upside-Down*, an exhibition of work by artists associated with SNO, at Minus Space, Brooklyn, NY.
- Links: <http://www.minusspace.com/log/gruner-postformalism.pdf>  
[http://www.sno.org.au/Images/Text/gruner\\_postformalism.pdf](http://www.sno.org.au/Images/Text/gruner_postformalism.pdf)
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