

EP+OW

JOHN NIXON

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EXPERIMENTAL PAINTING + OBJECT WORKSHOP

1988-1997

**CITY GALLERY, WELLINGTON
DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY**

SETTING THINGS OUT:

JOHN NIXON'S EXPERIMENTAL PAINTING AND OBJECT WORKSHOP

This exhibition presents a concise and primary example of EP+OW: the combination of minimal painting and objects from everyday life to form a dialectical synthesis of the abstract and the readymade.¹

When you spend time thinking intensively about an artist's practice, your own perspectives begin to shift. This has often happened to me in relation to John Nixon's work. I keep seeing things which somehow look stamped with his perceptions of art and the world. I recently saw a P&O container ship in this way. The ship was at its berth, sitting low in the water; its hull royal blue with P and O on the side in big white letters. Its superstructure was white and the funnel blue with a carbon-black top. It was stacked with blue, grey, white and orange containers. The graphic boldness of the letters reminded me of the abbreviated simplicity of Nixon's EP+OW, the title of this present exhibition.² The flatness and plainness of the colours, each one clearly demarcating a part of the boat and its cargo, was like Nixon's matter of fact use of paint and colour to distinguish between different components of a painting or different walls in an exhibition space. The combination of this simple colour scheme with the functional structure of the boat and its containers was in keeping with the way Nixon brings together a rudimentary language of painting with standardised objects from the real world.

For all its rigorous distinctions and polemical cast, Nixon's art is inclusive and relational. It reaches out toward the world and its objects; it assumes an almost ethical responsibility for making connections between art and the world. Nixon's dedication both to distinctions between things and to associations between things is very evident in the photographs of his studios. His studios stand halfway between the planned formality of the exhibition, and the informality and contingency of the everyday world. In her informative essay "Piet Mondrian's Atelier", Nancy Troy has shown how Mondrian saw essential links between his paintings, the aesthetic organisation of his studio and his philosophy of Neoplastic order.³ Mondrian called one of his lozenge paintings an "abstract surrogate" of his studio space, and he saw his studio as a physical model for the transformation of society into a "harmonious material environment". With this in mind Mondrian had photographs taken of his studio which showed carefully adjusted relationships between paintings, furniture and coloured squares and rectangles on the walls.⁴ In 1926 Mondrian even submitted a photograph of his integrated studio to the journal *Das Werk* to represent his practice in an issue exploring the theme of "The New World".



Studio, Sydney, Australia, 1990



EPW: Object Room, Roslyn Oxley⁹ Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1991



EP+OW: Stiftung für konkrete kunst, Reutlingen, Germany, 1994



EPW: Galerie Mark Muller, Zurich, Switzerland, 1993



EPW: The Berlin Project, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1994

Although images of artists' studios are often used to provide a background of anecdotal human interest to their art, after Mondrian John Nixon is the only artist I know of who has put photographs of his studio to an equally considered and strategic use. As illuminating and atmospheric as they are, photographs of the prodigal chaos of Francis Bacon's studio or the measured serenity of Brice Marden's studio for instance are extraneous to the real work of these artists. Nixon's studio photographs are more than poetic accompaniments to his work; they tell us how he goes about things and they form an intrinsic part of his practice. In 1990 Nixon published five colour photographs of different studios he had occupied between 1983 and 1989 in a small booklet with accompanying texts. The next year photographs of studios between 1980 and 1990 were presented in *West* magazine. In his retrospective exhibition catalogue *Thesis* (1994), Nixon included ten more photographs, this time in black and white, of his studios from 1974 to 1991.⁵ Since 1992, as his exhibition preparation has tended toward ad hoc development on location in Australian, European, American or New Zealand cities, Nixon's Sydney studios have fulfilled more of a purely functional role as storage rooms and he has chosen not to photograph them. Although the photographic record of Nixon's studios is not as extensive as that of his exhibitions, it is nevertheless equally significant, playing a role in affirming key aspects of his overall project.

*The artist is a producer not of consumer goods but of ideas, methods, strategies, information, organisation, research and demonstration.*⁶

So why does Nixon treat these photographs as significant? How do they inform us about the way he works and his philosophy of art? That Nixon should choose to present such a record of his studios suggests an interest in presenting these different venues as a form of inventory. The studio is not delved into as "imagination's chamber" or the "crucible of genius,"⁷ but like Nixon's paintings and selected objects, the range of different studios become variations on a basic type. This typological approach to the studio demonstrates its status as a concept open to interpretation rather than as a fixed convention. The number of studios recorded would seem to represent the mobility and adaptability of Nixon's practice. The relatively stable language of his art is continually being re-assembled for different occasions and in different contexts. In a recent interview Nixon talks about how he likes to work with materials that are at hand in different locations around the world; he makes use of material found in the street, in builders' dumpsters, or in art gallery basements, and uses friends' studios or apartments as temporary places to make pieces for upcoming exhibitions.⁸ Nixon's photographs show how quite different spaces are co-opted as studios: a domestic living room, disused office space and abandoned light industrial sites. Whatever the circumstances, his art is always making itself at home in the world, or rather establishing itself in dynamic relation with the world.

Looking closely at the individual studio photographs, what strikes me initially, especially in the 1990 selection, is the look of orderly clutter, of an accumulated density of things, colours, shapes and materials. In these well-stocked interiors it is often difficult to distinguish between work in progress, a finished piece and general studio paraphernalia. Most of the studios recorded resemble abundantly provisioned storerooms of furniture, papers, books, printed packages, suitcases, tools, cartons, bottles and iconic abstract paintings. Congeries of diverse objects and paintings are organised into piles and stacks on the floor, lent or propped against other things, and hung in irregular groups on the walls. Other material is stored on shelves or in assorted cardboard boxes, or laid out on table tops. The orchestrated plenitude of these spaces is the result of habit, chance and deliberation working together. Organisation in Nixon's studios is more relaxed than in his exhibitions but the same formal syntax of registration, displacement, isolation, dispersal and repetition is at work in both. The content of Nixon's studios testify to what Jean Baudrillard refers to as the primary pleasures of relating to the physical world through "laying things out, grouping them, handling them".⁹

The acts of sorting and setting things out determine virtually all aspects of Nixon's practice. This means that in many respects Nixon operates like a collector. He gathers paintings, objects, concepts, materials and methodologies into sets and series. Nixon is always thinking in terms of groupings and arrangements which not only point to the distinctness of the individual components but also draw attention to the variety of connections between the separate parts. This applies as much to the handling of ideas as it does to the disposition of things. As is the case within any collection, one of Nixon's individual paintings or chosen objects only attains its full status in relational terms. The significance of each singular item in Nixon's studio or in one of his exhibitions depends on its place in a paradigmatic chain or set.

*The function of the artist is to act as a laboratory of ideas of the experiment of art.*¹⁰

Nixon is in the business of making sense out of the things he collects, categorises and sets out. To explain the modus operandi of his art, Nixon and various critics have made comparisons with analogous structures of organisation such as the 'alphabet', the 'lexicon', the 'archive', the 'taxonomy' or the 'store'. In these terms Nixon's practice is firmly situated in the discourse of modernism which John Welchman calls "Modernisme à Larousse".¹¹ Welchman's coinage proposes the dictionary/encyclopedia as a symbolic model for those forms of cultural practice that reflect and interrogate the impulse to systematise the world and our experience of it. Moving from Walter Benjamin's discussion of collecting in his essay "Unpacking my library", through Duchamp's collection of his miniaturised oeuvre in a suitcase, and Foucault's description of the Enlightenment's 'tables' of classification, to Martin Buber's warning against knowledge systems which preclude



true engagement with the real world, Welchman maps out the contrasting possibilities of this space of "alphabetical assemblage".

Why all this concern for tabulation, lexicons and collections? We are touching here on one of the most deeply rooted and pervasive effects of the processes of modernisation on our perception of the world. Building on the example of Hegel and Marx, numerous interpreters of modernism have charted the changing status of people and things, subjects and objects, following the rise of industrialisation with its characteristic modes of production and distribution.¹² Industrialisation is dependent on the division of labour and quantitative rather than qualitative determinations. Industrialisation's rise to global dominance has led to an increasing abstraction of human and object relations. As they allowed artisans to be practically connected to their work at all stages of manufacture, pre-industrial forms of labour guaranteed the experience of physical, temporal and perceptual coherence. Intensive specialisation has destroyed this coherence. People who make industrial objects are connected with only one small part of the actual process of their production, and the people who consume these objects only know them as commercial entities dissociated from their actual geographical, historical and technological contexts. Materiality and concrete immediacy are continually eroded by impersonal abstract processes.

The sociologist of modernity Georg Simmel writes about a developed money and commodity society in which people are surrounded by a differentiated multitude of independent things, a "sheer quantity of very specifically formed objects" from which they are detached: "Both material and intellectual objects today move independently, without personal representatives or transport. Objects and people have become separated from one another."¹³ Things have fallen out of what Robert Musil called "the law of narrative order", they have lost the "narrative thread" which once held them together.¹⁴ As a result of this, objects appear to exist primarily as commodities in frictionless circulation, cushioned on the flow of capital which makes all things equivalent and interchangeable. Nixon, I believe, sets his work in opposition to the effects of this "unceasing infiltration of capital".¹⁵ He does so by constructing communities of paintings and objects in which the abstract and the concrete are in constant dialogue.

Typically modernist devices such as the impersonal inventory and all the dislocations of formal syntax seem to have rushed into the vacuum left by the loss of any law of narrative order. Whether we cite William Carlos Williams' maxim "no ideas but in things", the Russian poet Khlebnikov's idea of an alphabet with consonants of metal and vowels of glass, Tatlin's disjunctive reliefs using urban/industrial off-cuts, or Carl Andre's grid of steel plates, it is clear that much modernist art depends on the conjunction of emphatically differentiated parts. In numerous forms of modernist cultural practice a high degree of abstraction has existed in tension with an exaggerated or abrupt

materiality. This tension between abstraction and materiality mimics the split between the two parts of the modern industrial object; its status as a concrete thing with a particular history of manufacture on one side, and on the other its abstract status as an item of exchange in the monetary system.

The dictionary, the collection and the taxonomy have seemed both apt and useful as models for artistic structure in the modern era which has lost faith in unifying symbolic orders and in the structures of traditional genres. *Modernisme à Larousse* allows for a complex organisation of material which is spatial, gridded, distributional and metonymic before it is narrativistic, hierarchical or metaphoric. What is particularly relevant at this point is that the dictionary or collection paradigm can be seen as granting a highly accented autonomy to each separate part just as easily as it can be seen to impose a net of abstract uniformity over the different parts. This model then, in keeping with processes of modernisation, can be used to move between extremes of abstraction and systematisation on the one hand and the specificity of independent things (Simmel's "very specifically formed objects") on the other. John Nixon sets up shop in the midst of these contrasting possibilities for modernist culture. The simplicity and directness of each of his paintings, in terms of form and materials, allow them to be read alternatively as autonomous, physical things or as abstract units in a larger system. The simplicity and generic anonymity of each of his objects allow for similar readings. In combination, Nixon's paintings and objects integrate these different levels of abstraction and physicality. This integration in Nixon's work, or dialectical synthesis as he calls it, provides a resistance to the same fundamental conditions of modern experience which have formed his work. Like many modernist artists, Nixon makes work which is both a product of the gap between the abstract and the concrete, and a ceaseless labour to bridge this gap.

*The EPW (Experimental Painting Workshop) is an index of its own materiality and its methods of production.*¹⁶

Nixon is in the habit of making lists of painting types, geometric forms, objects, materials, methodologies and standard dimensions which are used in his current exhibitions and which form part of the slowly accumulating lexicon of his overall oeuvre. In 1992, "Notes on production", and 1993, "Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop" (both published in *Thesis*, 1994) Nixon provides two such inventories. A thorough chronology and technical notes on the development of the *Block* paintings between 1968 and 1992 are provided in the same catalogue. The variations on the *Block* paintings are carefully accounted for; the different dimensions for the different years are given; incremental increases in size are registered; the range of materials, colours, geometric surface divisions, the manner in which the *Blocks* are painted, whether sides are left unpainted or not, are all set down along with the stipulated requirements for exhibiting the works.



Further aspects of Nixon's practice are inventoried in a similar fashion. In a recent commentary on the EPW: Orange (II) (1996)¹⁷ Nixon considered it noteworthy that only one colour orange was used for the Copenhagen exhibition, but four types of orange were used in Munich. Just as the introduction of orange to the standard EPW index of colours is dated, so the addition of new brands of orange paint is noted. Just as individual studio spaces are named and dated, the six galleries holding solo EPW: Orange shows in 1996 are listed with the five galleries where the same work would appear in group exhibitions. The detail and dry pragmatism of Nixon's description reads like classificatory data on index cards. At times over the last few decades artists have chosen to offer only terse factual descriptions of their work in order to "let the work speak for itself". Although Nixon's explanatory restraint is not entirely unsympathetic to such an idea, his use of inventory and classification is more strategic, ambitious and procedurally integral to his project.

In texts or interviews Nixon often lists Minimalism, the Monochrome, Non-Objective art, Constructivism and the readymade as the major compass points from which he reads off the directions of his conceptually oriented practice. This set of five modernist principles has been distilled from historical example into a simple, yet versatile vocabulary for Nixon's continued production of archetypally modern works. Nixon is always making the ingredients of his art clear. In the same way that he sets out paintings and objects in rows on tables, or spaces them out on walls in his exhibitions, Nixon deploys words as separate components in a number of his texts which often read like rudimentary language poems. Technical terms and the names of colours, art movements, objects and key philosophical concepts are presented as single words in rows or in open spatial arrangements on the page. The effect of this formal organisation is that abstract concepts like 'tradition' or 'revolution' are treated as things, just as susceptible to spatial distribution as a 'sickle' or a 'spoon'.

*The EPW is a repository of ideas and models of non-objective experiment.*¹⁸

If we were to compile a representative inventory of the range of formal and material ingredients of Nixon's practice it could include the following:

Colours: red, yellow, black, white, dark blue, ultramarine blue, carmine, brown, pink, mid green, orange, purple.
 Materials: enamel paint, felt, masonite (hardboard), MDF, wood, metal, plywood, canvas, hessian, denim.

Geometric forms: square, rectangle, cross, stripe, border, bar, circle, letter, triangle, diagonal, chevron.
 Methods of applying paint: brush, sponge brushes, sponge paint rollers.
 Categories of works: block paintings, monochrome, cross paintings, geometric paintings, object paintings, constructions, large single objects or isolated ones, a tableaux of objects, models of exhibition spaces.
 Presentation of works: on tables, hung on walls, hung in corner of two walls, lent on walls, on floor, in rows, in clusters, loose groups, isolated.
 Types of objects: spoon, plate, spirit level, wine bottle, hammer, scythe, banner, potatoes, wooden boxes, loaves of bread, wicker pannier, suitcase, newspapers, books, bicycle, chair, table, music stand.

Such a list as this, which the work encourages us to make, and is in fact based on some of the artist's own lists, supports Nixon's claim that his painting practice springs from acts of nomination and not from the cultivation of painting as craft or skill. One could of course sit down and compile a list of materials and forms included in any artist's work. This is beside the point. Nixon always puts his work together in such a way as to draw attention to his stock of different elements, and these he keeps using again and again in different combinations and in different contexts. Nixon doesn't mix things together; he arranges the different parts, setting them out so that their articulated distinctions work off one another.

Nixon regards the EPW not as a "physical workshop" but as an "intellectual proposition". The EPW is intended as a laboratory for "analytical/formal research ... The proceedings of the workshop are disseminated through discussion, pamphlets and exhibitions".¹⁹ Each particular group of work is understood as presenting "the range of proceedings from a given period". The organisational structure of the exhibition's components, which has been geared to more spare and taut arrangements over the recent years, is intended to set out these proceedings clearly and point to the work's status as a form of research. The typological nature of his paintings and objects, and the presentational clarity of his exhibition designs testify to the place of analysis and method in Nixon's on-going investigation of the current state of painting and its possibilities.



Commenting on the objects, that he either attaches to his paintings or presents independently, Nixon says that they "are chosen as generic, representative of their type. In this they fulfil the same function as the limited range of colours, forms, and materials used within the boundaries that define the EPW."²⁰ He believes that if they are registered as 'classics' or archetypes by an audience, then the idea of a bicycle, or a hammer will be at its strongest. Some of Nixon's objects are like the type-objects which Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier championed as being representative of the best in anonymous, functional design, simple in form and free of superfluous artiness or decoration.

Nixon tells us a number of other things about how he chooses his objects. He says that they are deliberately selected with "the idea of a world-view" in mind and that they have a "real" function" in life, perhaps have had "some use in [his] life, either before or after their secondment or placement within the exhibition. A suitcase which is in one exhibition can then be taken on the next flight to Los Angeles, as a suitcase again. Its function is not lost."²¹ Contrary to the inward-turning attention of the private collector, a kindred spirit of the romantic, subjectivist artist, Nixon's work moves outward toward the world of physical and social experience. His preference for the terms laboratory and research should have alerted us to this. An ideal of laboratory research, destined for unspecified forms of social application, motivated many of the Russian Constructivists; the Constructivists have an important place in Nixon's conceptual genealogy. As Baudrillard says, in reference to the potential hermeticism of the private collection: "the object I utilise always directs me back to the world."²² Instead of losing track of the specific life-world context that all objects stem from, Nixon seems keen to always hold this in mind. When explaining what makes each apparently similar monochrome different from the next he says that it is "precisely those elements which make the objects of everyday life e.g. chairs, coats, plates, demonstrably different i.e. their moment in history, the cities where they are made, the methods of their production, their sizes, materials and colours."²³

The materiality of my work is part of the materiality of experience. I work from the premise that the work of art exists in a 'real', physical, rather than illusory world.²⁴

More of a world picture comes into view when we consider the references Nixon makes to basic human needs, activities and communal experiences. Consider the ladder, the chair, the bicycle, and the tools which signify a world of simple human actions and physical labour. In earlier exhibitions the wine bottle, the bucket of potatoes and the jars of preserves testified to a creative working of the earth, the cultivation and storing of its produce. Many of Nixon's objects require consideration as things in the way that Heidegger interprets the word. Heidegger reclaims the earlier meanings of 'thing' as a reference to a gathering, "specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter."²⁵ A thing therefore has the capacity to call up a form of shared significance grounded in communal experience. Objects understood as 'things' in this

way are able to restore a sense of duration and connectedness in a world dominated by the episodic and the discontinuous.²⁶

Heidegger's way of looking at things in the world and their social import requires a slowing of attention; a taking time with things. This in fact is something which Nietzsche believed the collector could teach us: "the slow gesture, and the slow look".²⁷ Nietzsche believed that by removing an object from its life of circulation as a commodity, the collector could restore something of its individual significance. Nixon's collecting and setting in order can teach us similar things. Although his work does not offer the sort of serene beauty of some purist geometric abstraction, it does depend on a form of calm pragmatism which returns us to the world with a clearer sense of how its separate components can be put together. Nixon's is an art practice which is not based first and foremost on the "private consciousness" but in thought and activities which are directed toward a practical and theoretical participation in "the social and human totality".²⁸

In relation to much contemporary practice the simplicity of Nixon's paintings and objects carries a kenotic significance. His art relinquishes grand effects, histrionics, and the romantic finessing of the individual work. Refusing the call for novelty or linear progress, Nixon operates with variations from a relatively stable but dynamic repertoire. A strong sense of care and method characterise all aspects of his oeuvre. Nixon's constant recombination of his signature objects and painting formats asks the viewer to look slowly, noting selections, pairings and juxtapositions in a context of thoughtful reflection. The community of relations that exists between the paintings, objects and concepts produces a continual movement between the stability of a basic language and the different forms of its articulation. This on-going dialogue between the typical and the particular attunes itself to the incompleteness and the continuities of everyday life.

Allan Smith, 1997.



EP+OW: Galerie Sophia Ungers, Koln, Germany, 1994



EPW Orange: Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1995



EPW: Kunstraum G7, Mannheim, Germany, 1995



EPW: 1979–1996, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, 1996

NOTES

- 1 John Nixon, "Technical Notes on the Exhibition EP+OW", Galerie Sophia Ungers, Cologne, 1994.
- 2 EP+OW: Experimental Painting and Object Workshop.
- 3 Nancy Joslin Troy, "Piet Mondrian's Atelier", *Artsmagazine*, December 1978, pp.82-87.
- 4 "The photograph shows the work table described by Seuphor ... [and] a corner of the black cupboard, with a white rectangular pasteboard applied to its side. ... The furniture and the objects such as the coloured box on the far table contribute to the overall composition and it is clear that Mondrian had deliberately arranged them to that end. Even the diagonal line of the stove pipe and the triangular pieces of rugs visible on the floor, as well as the oblique placement of the easel on the left, were taken into consideration." Troy, p.84.
- 5 John Nixon, Pataphysics Books, Melbourne 1990; "John Nixon. Studios 1980-1990", in *West*, December 1991, University of Western Sydney; *John Nixon. Thesis: selected works from 1968 - 1993*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne 1994.
- 6 John Nixon, "Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)", *Thesis*, unpaginated.
- 7 See Alice Bellony-Rewald and Michael Peppiatt, *Imagination's Chamber: Artists and Their Studios*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston 1982. Delacroix refers to the studio as a "crucible [of] ... human genius", *ibid* p.1.
- 8 John Nixon, "Notes on EPW: Orange (II) (international)", Sydney, 1996.
- 9 Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting" in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria 1994, p.9.
- 10 John Nixon, "Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)".
- 11 John Welchman, *Modernism Relocated: Towards a Cultural Studies of Visual Modernity*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1995, pp.1-38.
- 12 See Christoph Asendorf, trans. Don Reneau, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993, pp.7-17, 45-70.
- 13 Georg Simmel quoted in Asendorf, p.132.
- 14 Robert Musil quoted in Asendorf, p.5.
- 15 The term is Carolyn Barnes', untitled essay in *John Nixon*, Melbourne 1990, unpaginated.
- 16 John Nixon, "Notes on The Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)".
- 17 John Nixon, "Notes on EPW: Orange (II) (International)".
- 18 John Nixon, "Notes on The Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)".
- 19 *ibid*.
- 20 *ibid*.
- 21 John Nixon, "Interview. John Nixon with Ben Curnow", *Thesis*.
- 22 Jean Baudrillard, *op cit* p.7.
- 23 John Nixon, "Monochrome", *Thesis*.
- 24 John Nixon, "Interview. John Nixon with Ben Curnow", *Thesis*.
- 25 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1975, pp. 163-186.
- 26 See Walter Benjamin's contrast between the concepts of Erfahrung and Erlebnis discussed in Asendorf pp.5-6,66-67.
- 27 Nietzsche quoted in Asendorf, pp.49-50.
- 28 Henri Lefebvre, trans John Moore, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, Verso, London 1992, pp.149-150,251-252.



EPW: Monochrome 1968-1996 Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, Australia, 1996

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