

No Frills*

*Conditions that Apply to Contemporary Art

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Art history has been said to have come to an end¹. Since the 1970s and 80s, artists are commonly viewed as having lost interest in continuing the arguments that were fundamental to Modern art. Instead, as products of an increasingly globalised capitalist society, contemporary artists choose irony, parody and humour over criticality, and create works that are driven by scepticism, cynicism, and narcissism. Yet, even as contemporary art gradually becomes less reliant on theory, art history remains in the background kept there to be drawn on from time to time. With exhibitions such as the one presented by the artist-run initiative (ARI), No Frills*, currently on show at *blkmrkt project*, Southport, art history seems to re-emerge as a source of motivation for artists — not as its subject, but as the ‘footnotes’ or ‘fine print’ of the exhibition. Artistic movements that are either on the verge of being post-modern, such as conceptualism and minimalism, or encapsulate some of the essence of post-modernism, such as performance art and new media, have been readily included in the tactical arsenal of many contemporary artists, helping them achieve a sense of continuity in their work.

When looking at the No Frills* exhibition, the reference to art history seems to unfold before your very eyes: the objective of surpassing the physicality of the art object so characteristic to conceptual art; the playful view of the role of the artist that had been revolutionised by performance art; the sensitivity to space and the relationship between art objects and the viewer, which had been led by installation art; and so on. Like a patchwork made of torn out pages from books on art, the individual works and the exhibition as a whole reveal something about the ever-changing attitude towards the function of history. Just as the name No Frills* suggests, these contemporary artists are not preoccupied with embellishments that often come with art, such as obscure definitions of styles, periods and movements. Instead, they treat the history of the last 50 years in a more light-hearted and care free way, the result of which is an exhibition that could be described with Frank Stella’s statement: "What you see is what you see".²

¹ Since the 1960s, a number of theorists and historians engaged with or some variation of the idea of the end of art history; they include, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Daniel Bell, Arthur Danto and Han Belting.

² Frank Stella quoted in Jon Erickson. *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry*. University of Michigan Press, 1995, pp.107.

No Frills* comprises of the work of the four co-directors of the ARI, Antoinette J Citizen (Pseudonym for Michelle Woulahan), Courtney Coombs, Fiona Mail (Pseudonym for Kate and Cath), Catherine Sagin and Kate Woodcroft. The use of pseudonyms and collaboration by these artists, their indifference towards authorship and the origin of ideas, all convey the attitudes outlined by Roland Barthes' essay *Death of the Author*.³

Performance and interactivity runs strong in three of the works on display, one of which is created by Woodcroft, entitled *Try Me*, which seems to draw inspiration from Bruce Nauman's practice of simple activities, Marina Abramović's performances of endurance that explore the relationship between performer and audience, and the methodology employed by Joseph Kosuth's in *One and Three Chairs* (1965). This work consists of a video display



showing the front wheel of a tricycle in motion, which defines in a tele-visual way the basic premise of the work: tricycle riding. Found to the right of the video work is an actual tricycle and a path for riding on the floor — a perfect circle created from electrical tape. Completing the work is a performance on opening night in which the artist gives a demonstration of riding the tricycle by following the circle in the hope it entices viewers to have a go. Together these elements attempt to break through the seriousness that is often associated with art by engaging the viewer in activities which make the understanding of an artwork more immediate and accessible.



The work of Mail (Woodcroft and Sagin), entitled *Equalled Compartment*, is another interactive piece. Once again, the interactive component is demonstrated by the artists on the opening night: the two artists enter the triangular sculptures made from plywood and lock together their extended arms pushed through the openings found on the sides of the sculptures. The use of ordinary, industrial materials makes reference to minimalism, while the

performance component of the work is reminiscent of those of Vito Acconci; however, rather than inflicting discomfort or pain onto the body, as Acconci often does, this work uses the human body to help animate the wooden sculptures in a playful way, making them resemble the face-cut-outs displays found at amusement parks.

³ Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.

Entitled *Ikea: Recruiting Now*, Sagin's work comprises of two photographic prints that show the artist clothed from head to foot in Ikea branded paper bags. This work is as much about historical reference to performance as it is about contemporary issues. In the work, the human body has been reduced to a mere prop used to support flaccid bags. As a prop, the body provides the IKEA brand with a sense of substance and life, and links it human existence — all of it so essential for the corporate image. The inclusion of the brand as a subject of the work not only signifies the role of late-capitalism today, but also harks back to the emergence of the brand culture epitomised by icons of Coca-Cola or Nike, and by doing so refers to pop art in the 1950s which often appropriated signs in its works.



In her installation entitled *Neon Flux*, Coombs employs fluorescent light fixtures to form the word 'neon', giving a nod to minimalists such as Dan Flavin who was well known for creating sculptures and installations from the same objects. At first, the word 'neon' seems to be referring to the material used in the work. However, the ambiguity of the art piece due to a technical and visual difference between neon and fluorescent lights, encourages a

broader reading of this work. The word 'neon', for instance, could be interpreted in the context of the prefix of 'neo' which signals a 'new' form or a revival of an old one, bringing attention to the developments and practices following from minimalism, or it could be commenting on a dramatic rise in the use of the prefix in the post-modern era, further problematising the activity of reference.

When viewing the exhibition, it doesn't take long to realise that the viewer is not alone — peering out from behind a plinth as if overseeing the gallery, there is a taxidermic white rat. This work by Citizen (Woulahan), entitled *The Adventures of Nicodemus*, revolves around an immortalised rat modified with appendages that seem to convert the rodent into a futuristic-looking cyborg. Like a mad scientist, the artist planted wires in the head of the animal which holds a miniature joystick wired to a small robot located nearby. By re-creating the character of Nicodemus the rat taken from the children's book by Robert C. O'Brien, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, the artist sets out, so it seems, to undermine the seriousness of both art and science by evoking the child within the viewer, encapsulating the playful approach these artists have overall taken towards the history of art.