

# SNO

## Contemporary Art Projects

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## SNO 46 / Folk 1

Folk. Essentially *people* in its most auspicious meaning, embraces the collective, 'average' person's feelings or beliefs. The term is an evolved acknowledgment of every person's authentic right to being. Invariably, 'folk' clusters people with similar views in the face of broader, popular persuasions.

As a coming together of people, *Folk 1* continues SNO's commitment to the bringing together of formative picture practices, raising notions of unaccounted for oral traditions – a simple, unsophisticated, friendly, informal community.

Billy Gruner's curatorship here brings, if nothing else, an emphasis on this point by pulling together work from cities/countries that are clearly as distant from each other as can be. Sydney, Australia versus Haarlem, Netherlands. Gruner's point might be to bring together similarities from far and wide, but what pertains in this cluster of six artists shown through two rooms is in fact *difference*. And that is a point Gruner maintains has a relevant 'educational value' in establishing an historiography. This is to be considered not only in relation to local artists and their viewers but also to brother- and sister-folk elsewhere on this globe.

John Adair, Sydney.

*The following is an edited transcript of an interview between John Adair and Billy Gruner, held in March, 2009.*

**Billy Gruner** We may talk about concrete, non-objective or abstract points of view, but what we are actually talking about is maintaining a contemporary/avant-garde picture practice that advances concerns that have been in operation for well over 100 years now. Unfortunately, in this country it is not duly recognised. The Australian cognoscenti maintain a healthy support for figurative and pop derivations, and for reasons perhaps only known to themselves continue to malign visual art practice that does not acknowledge these criteria.

I would like to maintain a cogent line that does not bow to fantasy and support those artists that continue to bravely produce art that aims to be real and present rather than merely suggestive, illusive, strategic and weakened by an overtly considered critical deferment.

**John Adair** It's a big call.

**B.G.** No, not really. The knowledge and work has always been there in the regional Australian context. But for some reason this aspect of fitting critical appraisal has not been well documented or acknowledged in this country as having any true value, despite evidence to the contrary. I would encourage our artists to have more faith in their thoughts and chosen direction.

Bringing artists from other countries together with local artists displaying a similar point of view is a way to deal with this issue and it has worked well in the SNO program to date.

**J.A.** To encourage them?

**B.G.** Yes, but more to the point, by embedding artists into local folklore a process concerning ordinary matters is enacted. And that, regardless of opinion, may better enable fluid international dialogue to occur. Or, more significantly, more useful paradigms are placed about and are able to be experienced. A fitting art criticism of what is going on in Australian contemporary art is in fact deeply lacking at this stage, and the development of new discourse is still

disappointingly absent. It remains unaccounted for in Australian contemporary mainstream visual art practice overall, and perhaps not more especially so than at university level where history is so mistrusted – even utterly overwhelmed by dubious academic opinion.

**J.A.** So the *Folk 1* project is really a continuation of what SNO has been fostering for some time – the bringing together of artists from various stages of their career, ages, regions, cities, countries, etc.

**B.G.** Exactly. SNO is a national program with international interests. Except the point is laboured in this instance by bringing together artists from two capital cities – places located on opposing sides of the world. They are directed into a confined space, and only for a quick low pressure chat basically. Importantly, growing sensibility at SNO of late also has a punk reading available. It is a form of anti-conventional behavior underscoring a ‘do it yourself’ and ‘don’t wait’ mentality. For instance, if the result at SNO is sometimes a basic one, and perhaps that may be very true at times; and be unappealing to a more fussy art showing or visiting crowd seeking demanding entertainment, well so what... they should get involved, help raise money, and make the situation better for others.

**J.A.** Does this show work?

**B.G.** Yes it works, people have been brought together haven’t they? – No matter how primarily it has been achieved. That is a fact born out in this short discussion! If we had proper funding from a national level we would be much more than this, obviously. However, as stated, ideas matter more in a time of intellectual poverty.

**J.A.** And *Folk 2*?

**B.G.** ... would follow a similar conjunction. Melbourne versus Stuttgart, Brisbane versus New York, Perth versus Tokyo, etc. A premise for simple, friendly exchange. No assumptions.

## **Definitions:**

### **Folk:**

People, esp people of same type.

— Folks

Parents or close family.

Used to address people informally.

— Adj

Traditional or passed down in a community or country.

Coming from the traditional beliefs or ideas of ordinary people.

### **Folk-sy:**

Simple and unsophisticated /friendly and informal.

Artificially or affectedly traditional and homey.

### **Folk-lore:**

Traditional stories and explanations passed down in a community or country.

Stories and gossip that become traditional within a group of people.

The study of traditional stories, music and customs.

### **Folk-music:**

Traditional songs and music, passed from one generation to the next .

Modern music composed in imitation of traditional music.

### **Folk medicine:**

Medicine based on traditional customs and belief. It often uses herbal remedies and is usually practiced by healers not trained in conventional medicine.

### **Folk art:**

Paintings and decorative objects made in a naïve style.

### **Folk dance:**

A dance that is traditional to a culture, community or country.

**Folk hero:**

Somebody who attains legendary status among the public.

**Folk weave:**

A loosely woven fabric.

**Folk memory:**

A memory kept alive by a community and passed from one generation to the next.

Sourced from various dictionaries

# Correspondence

Hi all

Re: Folk 1 exhibition

Following is a short piece on my response to the show. Also I have posed three questions for you all. Look forward to receiving your emails.

*Folk 1* was a deliberate attempt by Billy Gruner to bring people from two very different cities/countries together, briefly... not quite a salon-hung show and yet not your average SNO group show of one artist per room. More like a small group, or two, of people huddled in conversation... at a gallery opening or a coffee house perhaps.

We are as pleasantly engaged in their conversations of difference as we are in their similarities.

There are two text-based works that happen to be Australian (Kelly and Villa). There are two works that engage with the overt fracturing of the picture plane via a mono/polychrome, one from either side of the world (Hollier and Voskuil). And there are two small stripy paintings that foster transparency through the delivery of their paint medium. Both happen to be from the Netherlands (van den Bos and Porck).

The six works are evenly spread through two rooms; the three linen backed pieces (Voskuil, Villa and Porck) coincidentally find themselves together in room 1. Strangely synchronous to this, the other three works happen to be cotton based substrates (van den Bos, Kelly and Hollier) in room 2.

But of course this is where any similarities may cease. Like all good folksters each artist is voicing their own opinion, not only through the crafting of their own picture, but less intentionally through the very character of their instruments of delivery – their substrates.

I personally find this very interesting in this particular cluster of artists, as I see a historical dialogue of substrates dating back hundreds of years to the Dutch and Flemish Renaissance fathers of formal portable painting. Coincidentally our

northern guests herald from the very same country that the portability of pictures was classically developed in the 1400 -1600s — the Netherlands.

This point would not be so pertinent were it not for Voskuil's substrate divulgent *There is no point in...*, 2008. Not only are we privy to its timber armatures but the areas of raw and unprimed (Belgian?) linen are also exploited, particularly on the face of the painting edges, bringing to mind the actuality of what might carry a picture.

Somewhat counterpointed to Voskuil's work is Villa's *White Monochrome*, 2008 a rather shy, small piece of unstretched, lead white primed Van Mulders Belgian linen, largely unaffected by the artist except for his signature in lead pencil. Perhaps it is important to note for the benefit of our guests, linen is a top-end product in Australia, lead white hand primed linen is gold to some. A good several years ago I imported Belgian linen. Middle-weighted, 2 metres of raw linen cost the same to buy wholesale (before shipment) as local 2 metres of 10 oz cotton cost wholesale in Australia, ie approx \$7.50 per metre. That linen would eventually sell retail in Australia for around \$50 per metre, primed linen around \$100 per metre.

Conversely van den Bos' *Inside/Outside #15*, 2008 uses white cotton canvas to boost his transparent colour pigment saturations, like mid 20<sup>th</sup> C American colourfield painters Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland etc (and so I wonder if this cotton fibre is a higher valued surface for Rene and his countrymen, like linen is a luxury substrate here in Australia?).

Siding with van den Bos's more traditional/formative use of cotton duck on a plain stretcher is Kelly's *Red Pages*, 2009. A gently provocative use of stretched cotton canvas layered with transparent painted sheets of German gothic text paper pages, Kelly's work also employs the careful removal of the canvas thread etching a grid in the surface of the paper, further disseminating the possibility of recognition of any narrative meaning in the text, as well as the surface itself. Here Kelly's use of the removal of substrate could be observed as apropos to Porck's *Untitled*, 2007, from the *Cohesion Series* layered approach. His attention to surface builds through painted threads and transparent fields echoes Kelly's compression and removal.

At this point Hollier's *Red White Green*, 2008 sympathises with his compatriot Villa in the opposing room. As both employ an "arte povera" approach to substrate. Both kind of awkwardly find themselves on the wall; Villa's with large headed notice board pins pushed through the corners of the otherwise freely floating off-cut and Hollier's closely hung panels appear to struggle with overlapped edges and uneven sides.

Hollier's use of discarded packing crate boards covered in cotton rag paper and Villa's prized, primed linen offcut both echo/belie formal leanings. The absence (Villa) or presence (Hollier) of a mannered surface causes these two works to connect through their opposite meanings. Hollier's careful balance of colour and space saturates the viewer with something in excess of intellectual engagement. While Villa's *White Monochrome* is not white at all but cream or the buff off-white of lead primer. Or is he reminding us of the 'non colour' of white? In lighting, white light is the summation of all colour and black is the absence thereof. Whilst with solids, black is the summation of all colour and white is the bleached absence thereof. Technically, unpainted-by-the-artist becomes a *white attitude*, ie nothing, not yet, wait... a profusely Dada moment for Villa that leaves the viewer waiting/wondering: "what didn't he get on with...?" Then you notice his signature, in pencil, written backwards, on the left hand side face of the work... it's finished.

Villa's invertedly signed substrate sums up the show for me. It is beat, it is folk, it is hippy, it is punk because in its recalcitrant recess to 'paint' it still maintains, or should I say, steadfastly demonstrates a formal comment on the object of pictures, the place of pictures and the author of a said picture.

Questions:

How does the inclusion of your work in *Folk 1* familiarise you with other artists from around the globe?

What would you like to add to the *Folk 1* conversation about your work in the show?

How does the title '*Folk 1*' have relevance to you or your work (if any)?

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Thanks for your essay, I found it a very interesting way of looking at the show. Substrate (or process?) as a dominate theme gives a unique reading.

To your questions.

1. Being unfamiliar with the work of the artists included in the exhibition it was a great experience to see and discuss the works of people whose concerns were close to my own. I enjoyed seeing the work of the Dutch artists. Thank you Billy, I wish I was in Sydney more.

2. I am not sure that I would like to add much more to the conversation about my work in the show, I guess it has to stand on its own two little feet. The questions that I got were of interest (what was the importance of the text, the construct/deconstruct dichotomy, use of thread as a drawing tool etc). I thought it had an interesting conversation with van den Bos's work. Your choice of the substrate as a theme and the shot of my work has made me resolve to clean my edges better! Hollier's work did not need snappy edges, and Voskuil's edges needed to be exposed, I thought mine should have been cleaner.

3. The title *Folk 1* did not have a great deal of relevance to the choice of work that I included in the show. I think that I responded to the title much as you have, that is all artists are people, communicating with other people, so "gather round". I enjoyed the conversations with the audience and the conversation that took place between the works.

I hope that this covers your questions,

Thanks again and all the best.

Wendy

1. It feels good to be involved in a network of (international) nonobjective artists. To notice others and be noticed by other artists gives more sense to what you are doing.

Thanks to Billy Gruner for his initiatives!

To be opposed to other artists in a kind of setting is exciting, and inspiring.

The conclusion of the show with this review and interview contributes to the feeling of involvement and is highly appreciated.

Hopefully it does not end here.

I wonder, how did people in Sydney experience the work, as Dutch, as Australian, or as universal? Is there some national glow?

2. I would like to add some information on my work:

the material I use is oil on linen, because it is strong.

Contrary to the taped lines in acrylic on cotton of my Dutch colleague Rene van den Bos, my lines are drawn by hand with oilbar.

The paintings in the *Cohesion* series are structured by three layers: the monochrome background, the thick lines hand-drawn at random, and finally a transparent surface which influences the underlying colours, leaving open the edges of the painting.

3. The title *Folk 1* has, as I see it, no other relevance to my work or me, than that it binds us artists together as all being just a bunch of people, 'folk' who happen to make art.

kind regards, Tineke Porck

(by the way, Tineke is not a man's name)

Dear John,

Thanks for your interpretation of the show. It is a bit difficult for me to comment because I have not been actually there. The only thing I have seen from nearby are the works of Rene and me. So to answer the first question: I don't know. I guess we live in a global world and kindred spirits can easily find each other. From the photo's I definitely would guess similar minds have met for everybody chooses some kind of rational and formalistic approach towards painting.

About my thoughts on the FOLK discussion; at first I was a bit sceptical of the whole idea to regard a very international type of art as a 'FOLK', or local attitude. Of course I know Billy's background and his interpretation of Greenberg's Australian lecture back in the sixties; claiming all Australian Modernists to be provincials by definition because they could not be more than copying the American originals. I don't agree with this disqualification. I did read the lecture later on and didn't read it quite that way. In my opinion Greenberg did not refer to Australian Modernist artists exclusively, but to Modernist heritage to have become a 'worldwide' sterile dominant echo of Modernist ideas in both figurative art (Pop-art) as in abstractionism (Minimal Art) and even in Mass culture as fashion and design. He sensed local qualities to have been disappeared in global modernism (we are still talking about 1968!). Somehow the globalism discussion has become very relevant for political activists striving against capitalism today but in my opinion it is not especially relevant in art today for art already searched the local and autobiographical extensively in the Post Modern era. I myself feel a need for international exchange and discussion; emphasizing on mutual fields of interest instead of on the differences.

However, your approach to look into matters on a very practical way and local situation; what materials are at hand, seems to make sense. It is true that linen is originally invented as a practical solution to make larger and lighter works. Not only making transportation easier but also preventing the surface to crack like the old oak shelves tended to do and being able to paint for instance large ceiling pieces, standing up in the studio and transporting and mounting them after finishing the painting.

I think even the whole Dutch painting in the 17th century can be explained by practical in stead of purely artistic incentives. As the Dutch economy was already a free market economy with all of the population freely participating in it, there grew a large middle class population who could and wanted to afford themselves paintings, but not of the size and price of the former nobility wanted to. So they wanted small nicely priced paintings. And artists adopted to the demand by specializing in what the people wanted. Landscape, portraits, still-lives, genre pieces, etc all fitting the small Dutch houses and usually quickly or efficiently painted because in a free economy, time is money. Only 19th century Romantics

started to interpret the subsequent fast and virtuous handwriting as an act of expressionism, but of course this is romantic bullshit.

I remember that one of the incentives to use linen the way I do (I believe it indeed is Belgian linen, but I also would have bought it if they sold it to me as Australian linen) was the very awareness of the constructive purpose the use of linen originally had. The awareness of history somehow helped legitimating for myself the steps I made.

To make a show a starting point for discussion and dialogue is a very good idea. Actually your contribution legitimates the show for it leads to new insides (or old ones as I already forgot about) and makes the work a starting point instead of a dead end, which in a way many shows actually are. If the title *FOLK 1* has any relevance for my work in particular I really doubt. I don't want to see my work as Folk art although one aspect associated with Folk does intrigue me and that's the role of craftsmanship in formalist and modernist visual language. Although obvious skilled work often is disturbing and annoying by lack of a profound or original concept, sometimes the other way around is also unsatisfying; a good concept in a insufficient execution. So skills to me are both problematic and necessary.

I hope I gave some kind of answer to your questions and that it is of any use.

With gratitude for all your efforts,

best regards,

Jan Maarten Voskuil