

# **Theo Koning: Object Syntax**

## **Artwork Labels**

# Introduction

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Wall text:

## Theo Koning: Object Syntax

Born in Avenhorn, Netherlands 1950, Theo Koning migrated to Australia with his family in 1953. In the mid-to-late 1960s, he apprenticed in wood machining and joinery, and in 1968, started attending evening art classes led by sculptor Hans Arkveld at Claremont Technical College (CTC). After finishing his apprenticeship in 1971, he pursued full-time studies at CTC, earning a Diploma of Fine Art in 1974. Later that same year he became a founding member of PRAXIS, an independent arts organisation established by artists at the forefront of contemporary art in Perth. This period laid the groundwork for a practice that remained hands-on, experimental and materially responsive over five decades.

Koning was one of Western Australia's leading figures in installation and process-oriented art in the 1970s. He expanded what sculpture could be, how space was used and how audiences might encounter art as something physical, temporal, playful and exploratory. He helped shape the development of installation art locally and contributed to broader shifts in how objects, materials and viewer experiences are understood.

Bringing together State Art Collection works from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, *Theo Koning: Object Syntax* highlights his early approach to artmaking, his relationship with materials, and the coded, relational language that

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runs through his oeuvre. Although his practice spanned many media, it consistently carried his distinctive sensibility: curiosity about the everyday, an instinct for transformation and a tendency to treat the discarded and the humble as sites of meaning. These works reveal his ability to recognise possibility where others saw waste, to build worlds from fragments and to prompt closer attention to the material life around us. Yet Koning's art was never solely about objects; it is equally concerned with equity, empathy, relationships and creative play – values that remain vital to how we think about art today.

Theo Koning passed away in 2022, leaving a rich legacy that is attentive to the nuance and intimacy of objecthood and the many meanings they hold.

# Theo Koning

born 1950 Avenhorn, Netherlands

arrived Western Australia 1953

worked Walyalup / Fremantle, Western Australia

died 2022 Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

## Objects of aggression or sexual gratification

1978

wood, cloth, feathers and fur

Purchased 1978

1978/00Z8-S

This work forms part of Koning's engagement with the ways objects absorb and transmit emotional, social and psychological charge. Through his tangible handling of found materials, he brings conflicting energies into dialogue – suggesting tension, vulnerability and notions of human impulse. While the title infers oppositional drives, the work itself remains materially grounded, emphasising its construction and the physical logic of joining one thing to another. In doing so, it discloses how meaning accumulates in objects – not only through overt symbolism, but also through the connotations embedded in language, texture and form, and through the viewer's own associative responses.

# **Theo Koning**

born 1950 Avenhorn, Netherlands

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## **Object D'art No 1**

1978

pencil, ink, crayon, watercolour and gouache

Purchased 1978

1978/00Z9-D

# **Theo Koning**

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## **Object D'art**

1978

pencil, crayon, watercolour and gouache

Purchased 1978

1978/0Z10-D

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## Drawing of an object-Object D'art

1978

pencil, ink, crayon and watercolour

Purchased 1978

1978/0Z11-D

Koning developed the *Object D'art* series during a period of self-reflection on shifting expectations and feelings towards object-making. These works are connected to a performance piece he made for the 1978 PRAXIS Process Show, held at the Octagon Theatre, UWA, where Koning violently destroyed a large wooden crate labelled "OBJECT D'ART."

Across the *Object D'art* series, the works probe the meanings attributed to objects when they are labelled as art, indicating how significance can be altered through intervention, reinterpretation or the introduction of alternative contextual language. The works from this series displayed here were loaned to the Art Gallery of South Australia in the year they were made, extending this inquiry to interstate audiences and offering insight into Perth's contemporary art developments at that time.

# Theo Koning

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## Objects of aggression or sexual satisfaction

1978

pencil, crayon and watercolour

Purchased 1978

1978/0Z12-D

This drawing revisits the nearby sculptural work *Objects of aggression or sexual gratification*. Through shifts in colour, tone and materiality, the composition introduces a gentler, more fluid sensibility that contrasts with the material tension of the three-dimensional piece. Koning's flattening of the forms softens their edges, opening space for a more interpretive reading of their underlying dynamics. In this two-dimensional depiction, the sense of strain or opposing forces becomes less visually explicit, allowing the title to play a more active role in generating tension. The change from *gratification* in the three-dimensional work to *satisfaction* here might suggest a move from short-term satiation to a lasting, internalised resolution.

# PRAXIS Community Poster Workshop

Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

## Theo Koning

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## The Praxis Folio 1985: Inner world with flower

1985

screen-print

Purchased 1986

1986/0034.3

This work was made for *The Praxis Folio 1985*, produced by PRAXIS Community Poster Workshop in 1985. The folio also includes prints by Brian McKay, Mary Moore and Helen Taylor.

In the mid-to-late 1970s, Koning's drawings, paintings and sculptures primarily focused on exploring form and meaning within the context of sculptural practice. By the mid-1980s, he began to embrace the graphic and expressive potential of drawing, painting and printmaking more fully, and these two-dimensional works appear increasingly attuned to relationships between people, place and objects. Works from this period often feature recurring motifs arranged in layered compositions, sometimes set within real-world contexts. Collectively, these elements create a coded visual system – a personal dialect of form unique to Koning that provides a consistent thread across his practice.

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## **View from the studio, Albany**

1986

pastel, charcoal, ink and synthetic polymer paint

Purchased for the

Guy Grey-Smith Memorial Collection, 1986

1986/0207

In 1986, Koning was based in Albany while lecturing at the newly established Curtin University of Technology School of Art Annexe. Works from this period reflect his responsiveness to the local environment while remaining attuned to broader international art-historical currents. In *View from the studio, Albany*, this appears in his engagement with the surroundings beyond the studio, expressed through a compositional sensibility shaped by – but distinct from – pictorial models drawn from elsewhere. The work was included in the 1987 Art Gallery of Western Australia exhibition *Among the souvenirs: Western Australian art in the eighties*, curated by Dr David Bromfield, who noted Koning's fascination with 'some of the stylistic vocabulary of Picasso' and his ability to rebuild such influences 'from the inside,' shaping them through lived experience and personal mythology.

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## The Divine Labour The Great Secret

1985

pen, ink and gouache

Purchased for the  
Guy Grey-Smith Memorial Collection, 1986

1986/0208

*The Divine Labour The Great Secret* sits within Koning's mid-1980s exploration of symbolic and relational imagery. While open to interpretation, the work gestures toward ideas of productivity and masculinity, and the search for equilibrium – within the self, within a community and within the natural and social systems shaping daily life. The layered composition builds meaning through both the visible and the implied, echoing the ongoing negotiations that underpin how we relate to each other and to the world. Consequently, we might consider how symbols gain significance through arrangement and repetition, and how individual parts coalesce into broader, continually shifting frameworks of understanding.

# Theo Koning

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## The hot chook shop

1974

mixed media

Audio: Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens; written by: Kramer/Whitney, Bourne Co.; administered by: Universal Music Publishing Pty Ltd; sound recording: Louis Jordan

Purchased 1992

1992/0229

‘Finding things at a tip, a beach or on the street is often the beginning or the inspiration. Life as it comes to me presents much injustice, brutality and ugliness that fills me with concern and my work often tries to deal with this. Also happiness, beauty and love, stimulate my urges to create and reflect these insights and feeling, though, most of the time is spent trying to satisfy the urges to make things. To drill and screw, nail things together, to play with shape, texture, colour, paint and stuff. To exist in another part of my mind, in my own space.’

**THEO KONING, 1991. ‘BACKWARD GLANCE: A SURVEY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE FROM THE MID-1960s TO THE 1990s’.**

This exhibition runs alongside *Objet d’Art: Theo Koning and his Creative Self* at Walyalup Fremantle Arts Centre (WFAC), on display until 26 January 2026.

## Wall text:

*The hot chook shop* was first exhibited at the Walyalup Fremantle Arts Centre (WFAC) during the 1974 exhibition *3 x 1 Show*, with fellow artists David Francis and John (Onisiforou) Paul. Of his work from this period, Koning stated:

In 1974, I was interested in making sculptures that looked, felt and smelled Australian.

Dry and cracking, sunburnt and rusted, scarred and textured, wobbly and repaired a thousand times and then thrown out.

*The hot chook shop* sits squarely within this vision of his practice while actively challenging assumptions about what counts as art. Koning reconfigured the work for his 1977 solo exhibition at the Undercroft Gallery at the University of Western Australia (UWA). It was later featured in *Backward Glance: A survey of Western Australian sculpture* at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA) in 1991, where it occupied an entire room.

Following its 1992 acquisition by AGWA for the State Art Collection, *The hot chook shop* was included in the 1995 exhibition *100 Years of Western Australian Sculpture 1895–1995*, where curator Robyn Taylor noted it had ‘taken on something of a local mythic status.’ While earlier versions of the work varied somewhat, its current configuration – established by Koning at PICA in 1991 – has remained unchanged since.

## Wall text:

*The hot chook shop* operates, as Koning stated in 1986, as 'sort of a poke at the Kentucky Fried outfit,' serving as a commentary on the global commodification and branding of local food and the evolving processes associated with mass production and consumption. In a 1976 Sunday Times newspaper interview, Koning explained:

This was a comment on the way we think about chickens today. I mean, nobody ever stops to think about chooks really. At one time you would have gone out and cut their throats and watched them bleed and now you just drive in and get them handed to you hot, in a box. I'm not crusading or anything: just commenting.

Koning's *The hot chook shop* reimagines the burgeoning fast-food culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s through the familiar materiality of a local delicatessen, evoking an earlier Australian provincialism that predates the rise of franchises like KFC. Within this frame, the 'cooked chook' becomes an emblem of globalisation, cultural homogenisation and the erosion of local traditions under a prevailing capitalist system. What emerges is an unflinching look at the forces shaping our world; dark realities are laid bare within a setting imbued with Koning's irreverent humour. He leans fully into the comedic potential of chickens while their peculiarities, broader cultural meanings and the trajectory of their lifecycle become allegories for human existence. This

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combination of humour and rigorous observation became a hallmark of his practice, in which he engaged with social, political and relational issues with both playfulness and weight.

Over 50 years since its inception, the work's critique of social structures and ethical concerns remains strikingly relevant.