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AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

Quarterly



Quarterly

EDITORIAL

In accordance with policy to broaden the Quarterly's scope beyond mere documentation of acquisitions, this number includes a substantial article on Billy Apple — not simply because we hosted new works and in a sense fleetingly acquired them, but more because of the interesting side effects of the Arts Council sponsored tour. Whether or not one accepts Apple and/or his work is not the point. The point rather is that when a bit of the outside world, albeit odd to New Zealand but nevertheless common fare in most of the built-up parts of the Western world, enters this country, a reaction is liable to set in which suggests that this nation's corporate body is still as effectively laced with antibodies against what some would see as 'foreign' intrusion, as it ever was in bad good-old-days of the *Arts Yearbook* 30 years ago when one or two of our today's more important artists were having to fight for their existence simply because they were different. Like a piece of test paper Apple dunked himself into us to show that the specimen is not entirely healthy. If some of the rurally minded city establishments around the country are so low in good manners and intellectual funding as to be unable to cushion this average kind of shock or take up the slack, as it were, on a small scale, it does not bode too well for our future in any field, let alone art. With 50 years between them such widely divergent spirits as Katherine Mansfield and Billy Apple considerably overlap in their reasons for total exile.

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William Powell Frith (1819-1909) British
Pope Makes Love to Lady Wortley Montagu (1852)
Oil on canvas 1180x942mm Acc.no. 1975/2
Signed (LL) W.P. Frith 1852

David Bomberg



DAVID BOMBERG (1890-1957) British
Players, Ghetto Theatre 1919
Blue crayon with wash, 260 x 204 mm
Presented by Mrs Beryl Grant, Auckland. Acc.no. 1974/61

In 1919 David Bomberg, a forceful exponent of modernism in British painting, produced a series of drawings which demonstrate a transitional phase between the two distinct directions of his work.

From the severe geometric constructions of his 1912-1914 period, to which the important paintings *Ju-jitsu*, *In the Hold* and *The Mud Bath* belong, Bomberg evolved, through these small works on paper, a personal vocabulary based on cubist principles which allowed the artist's natural humanism to emerge.

Formerly, the images had been composed of flat surfaces, often arranged in a grid pattern, of vivid colour, with figures conforming machine-like to the extreme abstraction of the whole. The new direction brought a more realistic handling to the human form, and although the over-all treatment remained angular, the use of ink, wash and crayon softened and gave greater plasticity to the subject.

The drawings of 1919 fall into a scheme comprising twelve parts with twelve variations to each part. They were concerned with figures in a setting. *Players, Ghetto Theatre* belongs to the theme 'Opera'. Other themes Bomberg chose included 'Ballet', 'Drama' and the 'Audiences'. In September of that year, they were exhibited at Frank Rutter's Adelphi Gallery in Duke Street, London. It was the artist's second one-man show.

In commenting on this series of a theme and variations, William C. Lipke points out in his essay for the Arts Council catalogue to the Bomberg retrospective in 1967, "What is remarkable about these wash drawings is the fact that while the idea behind the project was rigidly controlled and elaborately worked out, the actual treatment of forms and space, of figure and ground relationships, was a radical departure from his previous work."

Following this large and significant output of drawings, Bomberg's freer and more relaxed style extended to his oil on paper series, the 1920-1922 'Imaginative Compositions', and a work such as *Ghetto Theatre* of 1920. M.T.H. Sadler wrote in the "Westminster Gazette", following the London Group Show where this painting was exhibited, "Bomberg is at his best in *Ghetto Theatre* because, I suspect, he allows himself to retain some of the rigidity of technique and inclination to distort externals in the interest of general design — that in the heyday of English Cubism stood him in good stead ..."

The theatre in question, more properly known as the Pavilion Theatre, was familiar to Bomberg from his childhood in the Jewish community at Whitechapel; a vivid, struggling area of London's East End.

He had been born in Birmingham, the fifth child of a Polish immigrant leatherworker, and he moved with his family to London in 1895. In his early adolescence, Bomberg regularly walked from the East End to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert to practise drawing. At about the age of fifteen he began an apprenticeship to the lithographer, Paul Fischer, but perhaps this

contact proved too limited in scope and too time-consuming for the young man bent on becoming an artist. He terminated his contract in 1908 and began attending Sickert's evening classes at the Westminster School, and afterwards studied at the Slade School full-time.

Bomberg's powerful innovations, derived from Cubism, commanded serious attention and from 1912 to 1914 he was involved at the heart of the modern movement in London and Paris. Those were the years of ferment, following Roger Fry's post-impressionist exhibitions. Cubism and Fauvism were emerging and Wyndham Lewis and his circle of Vorticists were active. At this stage Bomberg was adamant in his wish to remain outside the confines of a closely defined group and although he was in close touch with Vorticism he was never part of it.

From 1923 to 1927 he worked in Palestine, devoting all his attention to painting from nature. Afterwards he travelled and painted for longer or shorter periods in Spain, Scotland and North Wales. By the 1930's, Bomberg had completely abandoned the cubist-influenced work of his first period. He no longer centred his interest on human activity in space, interior or exterior, but concentrated on landscape and portraiture. His late works are manifestations of feeling expressed in sweeping manual gestures.

Disillusionment for the artist began in the twenties when his fame started to fade; but in spite of the indifference his work suffered, Bomberg never lost the conviction of his own worth and he continued to paint and draw, often under poverty-stricken conditions, with immense energy and concentration.

His obvious neglect may be partly accounted for by his temperament which was uncompromising and sometimes aggressive, causing constant misunderstanding; his isolation from a fixed school of thought, except towards the end of his career, when he became the inspirer of the Borough Group of younger artists, and the Borough Bottega; and partly through his work itself. The expressionist manner towards which Bomberg turned and of which the drawing *Players*, *Ghetto Theatre* shows the beginnings, was a tendency outside what we normally associate with British art. These paintings and drawings were not illustrational, anecdotal, gentle or refined, but like all of Bomberg's work they were monumental and intense. It was not until the Arts Council decided to give him a posthumous exhibition in 1958 that he rightfully emerged as one of the outstanding artists in twentieth-century British painting.

We should like to thank Mrs Beryl Grant for presenting this drawing to the Auckland City Art Gallery and Mrs Lilian Bomberg for her help in providing the title and relevant background information.

ANNEKIRKER

Fernand LÉGER



FERNAND LEDGER: *Deauville*; gouache, 220 x 270 mm, signed with initials and dated 1950. Purchased by the Mackelvie Trust Board, 1975.

Among the great French painters of the 20th century Fernand Leger (1881-1955), once described as the poet of pictorial dynamism, was one of the most original. Where others viewed their subject matter through the eyes of the 20th century, Leger chose to paint things

which were specifically of the 20th century.

Of Norman peasant extraction, he claimed that the young and the workers were always his real audience. Teaching kept him close to the young.

Before the first World War his painting was conventionally cubist. After his years at the Front he pretended to have learnt much from the glint of sunlight on a gun barrel and his subsequent painting was concerned with the three dimensional solidity of machines and manufactured objects. Cogs, wheels, and factory chimneys fed this concern. His human figures were static and tubular, symbolising the synthesis of man and machine. He was said to be the first to invest the machine and the manufactured object with dignity.

Apollinaire said that Leger's fantasy would never transport him to fairyland, and others, not realising they were an integral part of the design, suggested that his liberal use of strong colours indicated a basic insensitivity; but the geometrical simplicity and severity of the powerful images he created appealed to the architectural imagination of men like Le Corbusier and led eventually to the great murals and wall decorations of which the facade of the church at Assy in Haute-Savoie is such a splendid example. Only the Mexicans showed the same understanding of scale and structure in relation to mural painting.

In 1940, during the second World War, Leger went to the United States of America where he was already much honoured and stayed there for the duration. This period produced his marvellously composed paintings of divers and acrobats, their limbs now plastic and intertwined.

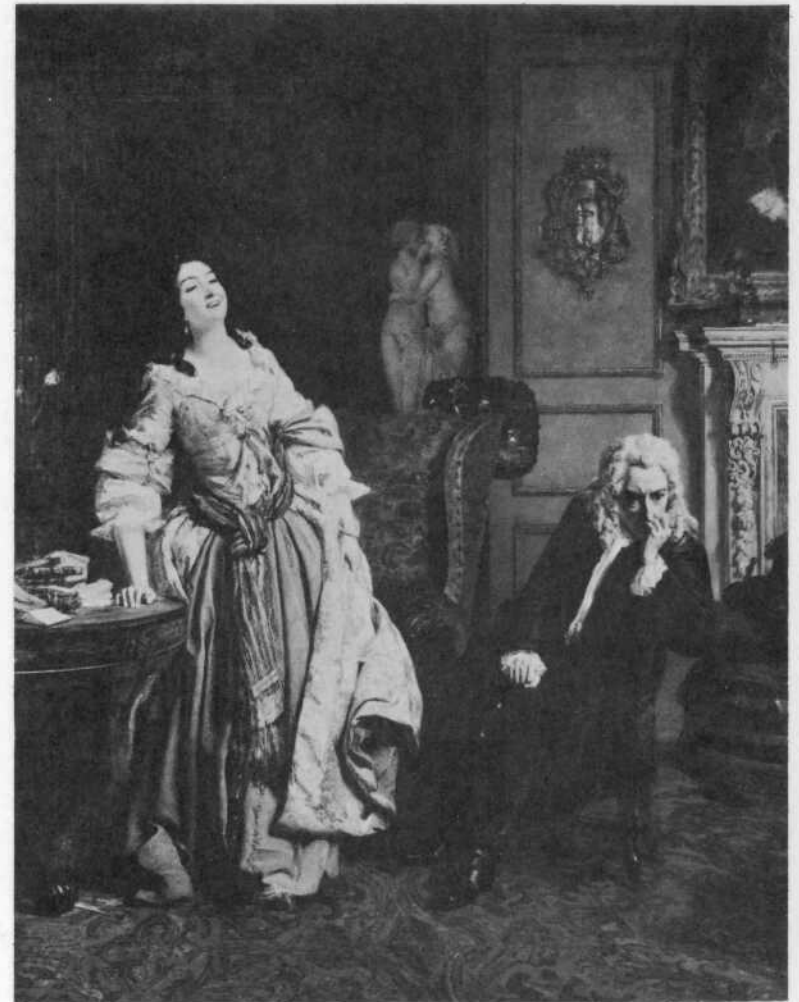
His return to France was marked (as one writer described it) by an infatuation with the countryside, with clouds, wild flowers and even cows. This seems to have provided the counterpoint essential to "greater" art as he saw it. For him "greater" art was based on two ideas set against each other, decorative art on a single melodic line.

The lyricism of the little Mackelvie gouache is clearly related to this post-war period when the cogs of machinery were replaced by bicycle wheels and his figures became more human, more alive. The titles of his paintings reveal his new pre-occupations — *Les Loisirs*, *Les Belles Cyclistes*, *Le Campeur*.

Deauville, is a minor painting, little more than a sketch, and, though it demonstrates Leger's typical subject matter at that time, the horizontal limbs, the trappings of leisure and the use of primary colours (black and white reproduction cannot convey its impact), it lacks the formality of his major works. Because of this it tells us, as sketches often do, a great deal about his attitudes and his methods and it transmits in remarkable fashion the joyousness he obviously felt in painting it.

JOHN STACPOOLE

William Powell Frith



William Powell Frith (1819-1909) British
Pope Makes Love to Lady Wortley Montagu (1852)
Oil on canvas 1180x942mm Acc.no. 1975/2
Signed (LL) W.P. Frith 1852

WILLIAM POWELL FRITH (1819-1909). Pope Makes Love to Lady Wortley Montagu

This work was originally exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852, the year before he painted *Ramsgate Sands*. Later it appeared, lent by S. Oxenham, at the 1855 International Exhibition in Paris where it was awarded a Second Class Medal and received extensive comment in the French press: Etienne Delecluze, *Les Beaux-arts dans les deux mondes en 1855* (Paris, 1856), p. 103. Edmond About, *Voyage a travers l'Exposition des beaux-arts* (Paris, 1855), p.17. Theophile Gautier, *Les Beaux-arts en Europe 1855* (Paris, 1855), p.49. It then changed hands several times: in 1873, sold by Hargreaves to Agnew (Christies/£1417), in 1881, sold by Col. Holdsworth to Permain (Christies/£J240) and in 1906, sold by Sir F.T. Mappin, the uncle of our donor, the late Sir Frank Mappin, Bart, of Auckland, to Shannon (Christies/£483). It is not clear when or how it returned to the Mappin family.

The scene depicted is an imaginative reconstruction of Lady Wortley's celebrated rejection of Pope's sexual advances. Their now famous literary correspondence which began in a low key and which for Lady Wortley was always to remain so — she turned a perversely deaf ear to the whole thing — was for Pope a long and elaborate epistolary mating dance which in the end got unbelievably suggestive and wild. For instance, while she was in Turkey with her diplomat husband, Pope became so obsessed that she would abandon herself to the "... lewdness of life..." that in a letter to her he described Turkey as "the land of jealousy where the unhappy women converse with none but eunuchs and where the very cucumbers are brought to them cut." When he did finally declare his love, she laughed uproarously and they were firm enemies from then on. To his threat to "set her down in black and white", she replied that she would do the same in "black and blue", though there is no evidence that he was actually beaten. And so it went on, with the public arena of printed verse their battle-ground.

With a career coinciding almost exactly with Queen Victoria's reign, Frith was one of the most successful and typically Victorian painters. The National Bibliography describes his parents as an "ancient and decayed family ... in domestic employment..." His father became the landlord of a Harrogate pub. At his father's request young Frith rid himself of an irrational urge to become an auctioneer and "passed his time in various grotesque performances with pencil and chalk" to make good as a painter. The Victorian doctrine, to which Frith's father most certainly subscribed, that institutionalized hard work was a perfect substitute for almost anything especially genius, was and still is the mainstay of Academicism. As a Royal Academy student he painted portraits of prosperous Lincolnshire farmers, charging £5 for heads and £10 for half-lengths. Later in London he specialized in literary and historical scenes. He first

exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840 and by 1853 when he filled the vacancy at the Academy left by Turner's death, his reputation was great and secure, resting then as it does today on a few great panoramic scenes of contemporary life. Queen Victoria bought

Ramsgate Sands; she later commissioned him to paint the Prince of Wales' wedding. *Derby Day* (1858), *The Railway Station* (1862) and *The Salon d'Or Hamburg* (1871) followed. His work circulated widely in engraved form. He was one of the first artists to enlist the aid of photography with the result that his work documents the age as richly as the books of his friend Dickens. Paradoxically he drew praise from the critics, whom he detested no matter what they said about him, only at a time when his sales had dwindled to practically nothing. Thorough-going businessman that he was, he referred to those who bought his work as his "employers" and to the activity of painting as his "practice". Reading through Frith's writings today it is not hard to understand what it was that once moved Napoleon to describe the English as a nation of shopkeepers.

Sale room records show that Frith's reputation was increasing in the 1850's and 1860's. It reached a peak in the 1870's, dropped off sharply in the 1880's and then declined steadily during the last two decades of the artist's life. For three decades after his death his work aroused practically no interest. The average price from 1911 to 1939 was about £28. But now his work has the same relative values that it held in the 1870's when Frith was in his prime.

Frith died neglected at the age of ninety in a house festooned with the honours and insignia from five nations. As his daughter (one of twelve children) put it: "Papa's pictures ceased to sell when (the critic) Stephens took to praising him in the *Athenaeum*, a fact which always struck me as very curious". But of all the cadavers being dug up in today's mass exhumation of things Victorian, Frith's is perhaps freshest.

T. GARRITY.

AN EXTRACT FROM FRITH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY RELATING TO "POPE MAKES LOVE TO LADY WORTLEY MONTAGU"

Before devoting myself to more elaborate compositions from modern life, I determined to try to realize a scene that had always struck me as admirably adapted to pictorial representation, namely, the quarrel of Pope and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, or rather the cause of the quarrel, for it is said that, in a moment of passion, Pope declared his love for the beautiful Lady Mary, who received the vows of the poet with astonishment that resolved itself into irrepressible laughter.

By anyone acquainted with the character of Pope — and who is not? — the fearful blow that such treatment would be to a man so sensitive, may be imagined; and the ample revenge he allowed himself to take in after years, be somewhat excused. Admirers of Pope objected to the subject as placing the poet in a humiliating position. Leslie, I remember, spoke to me strongly on that

point; but the picture was done, and hanging on the Academy walls, when the objectors opened fire; so repentance, which I confess I felt, came too late. The truth was, I could not resist the dramatic effect of the two figures — the consuming rage of Pope, contrasted by the cruel laughter of the lady. My admiration and respect for Pope should perhaps have prevented me from exposing so great a man to ridicule and humiliation. *Mea culpa! mea culpa!*

Of all the authorities, and they were many, that I consulted for the likeness of Pope, the bust by Roubiliac is the only one that conveys the man: there he is with features worn by suffering, but showing the intellectual strength that must have distinguished such a man. The portrait by Jervas in the National Collection, though interesting as giving a more or less correct rendering of the "shape and make" of the man, conveys no idea to my mind of his intellectual power. Reynolds said that no man could put more into a picture than there is in himself; if that be so, there was not much in Jervas, most of whose portraits are examples of what I once heard a painter say of a likeness of a strong-minded man: "The fellow," meaning his brother artist, "has made a likeness of So-and-so certainly, but he has managed to knock out his brains." There are many so-called likenesses of Lady Mary, but they differ from each other nearly as much as do those of her namesake the Queen of Scots. In Mr Gibbons's collection there is a beautiful picture by Sir Joshua that is called Lady Mary; but I doubt if the dates will serve, for Sir Joshua could scarcely have painted the beloved of Pope in the prime of her loveliness. In Mr Gibbons's picture the original could not have exceeded her thirtieth year, when Sir Joshua was a young and unknown man.

In my picture I fear I cannot claim much resemblance to the beautiful original, though my lady is handsome enough to be the cause of love in Pope or anybody else. An incident occurred in connection with this picture that is worth recording, as showing the way artists are sometimes treated by their — so-called — patrons. A collector, of a somewhat vulgar type, had long desired me to paint a picture for him. I showed him the sketch, and to prove the culture of the gentleman, I may mention the following facts:

"What's the subject?" said he.

"Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Pope," said I; "the point taken is when Pope makes love to the lady, who was married at the time, and she laughed at him."

"The Pope make love to a married woman — horrible!"

"No, no, not *the* Pope — Pope the poet!"

"Well, it don't matter who it was; he shouldn't make love to a married woman, and she done quite right in laughing at him; and if I had been her husband, I should" etc.

"Very well," said I, "as you don't like the subject we will say no more about it. I will paint you something else."

"Oh no," was the reply; "I like to see a woman laugh at a man who makes an ass of himself. I'll take it. What's the figure?"

"Before I name a price," said I, "I must tell you that there is a condition attached to the picture which must be agreed to by whoever takes it; and that is, that I may make a small copy of it for a friend. So if you object to copies, as many people do, now is the time to say so."

The exact size of the intended copy was fixed, the condition and price,

three hundred and fifty guineas, agreed to and in due time the picture was finished and highly approved by my learned friend, who, I discovered afterwards, had never read a line of Pope, or indeed even heard of him.

When the Exhibition was closed, I wished to begin the copy at once; but my "patron" begged to have the picture for a few days, as he "wished to show it to some 'country friends.'" I let it go, and when I applied for it according to agreement, the owner quietly defied me, and refused to carry out an arrangement to which he acknowledged he had consented. He then proceeded, without consulting me, to make terms with an engraver for the production of the picture in mezzotint — a process quite unsuited to it — pocketing a hundred guineas for the copyright. There are people so amiable as to submit to insult, and even injury, without complaining. I am not of that species, and my complaints were loud enough to reach the ears of my employer, who, to my surprise, made his appearance one morning at my house. I froze him by my reception, and declined to shake hands, to his great surprise.

"I hear you are annoyed because I can't allow you to copy my picture," he began.

"Did you, or did you not, consent to a copy being made when you bought the picture?" said I.

"Well, certainly I did; but all my friends say that a copy, ever so small, would take away from the value of the original."

This was too much, so I tried to close the interview by asking, in my loftiest manner and in stereotyped phrase, "To what am I indebted for the honour" (honour with sarcasm) "of this visit?"

"Well, look here" (I fear, he said "look 'ere"), "I can't have a copy done; but I'll tell you what — I will give you a hundred pounds, and you can divide it with the gent you have to do the copy for, as a compensation like for the copy."

My reply was conveyed without speaking; for I went to the door, opened it wide, pointed out to the "gentleman" the way he should go, and he went out without another word. He died long ago. His pictures were sold at Christies where "Pope and Lady Mary" fetched twelve hundred guineas. No wonder, when such instances as the above — seldom so gross — can be multiplied by artists to any extent, that they should prefer dealing with dealers who understand art and artists, and can be legally bound to carry out (in rare cases, when moral binding is not sufficient) their engagements to the letter. A dealer, it should be remembered, has a variety of tastes to satisfy. What does not please one "client" may please another; but the "patron" may have a peculiar taste, or no taste at all, may be as full of whims and fancies as he is of ignorance, and then the life of the painter is not a happy one. For many years I have always sold my pictures to what is called "the trade", and have invariably escaped the tribulation that so often attends the patrons' patronage.

Sir Henry Raeburn



Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823) British
Master James Hay (c1814)
Oil on canvas, 745x621mm Acc.no. 1974/51

The portrait *Master James Hay* by Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823) was bought for the permanent collection late 1974 from the exhibition "Paintings and Drawings from Agnews, London" held at the David Jones Art Gallery in Sydney Australia, 1-19 October, 1974. According to *Graves' Art Sales* it changed hands at Christies in 1903 and again in 1905 when it was bought by Reid. In 1910 it was lent by John A. Holmes to Wallis & Sons who organized an exhibition of Raeburn portraits at the French Gallery, Pall Mall, London. Later it appears to have become part of an American collection. It is interesting to note that about this time in 1911 Duveen paid a record auction price of

£33,315 for a Raeburn.

According to Grieg the portrait of Master Hay is datable to Raeburn's early period between 1790-1796 — a time during which he had exhibited at the Royal Academy only once. However the French Gallery Catalogue of 1910 (misquoted in the 1974 Agnew Catalogue provenance as 1911) describes the sitter as "Master Hay, afterwards Captain Hay of the 40th North Indian Regiment". Research undertaken for the Auckland City Art Gallery by Peter Gaston, a military archivist in England found that James Hay was born in Madras in 1800 and died while on furlough at Perth in 1832 and that he had in fact joined a 40th regiment in 1824. This means that depending on the age of the sitter, the portrait must have been done between say 1810 and 1815 which is about twenty years later than Grieg's dating. Other incidental information that came to light in this preliminary probe was that the boy's father was a George Hay of the firm Hunter & Hay of Madras and that the mother noted on the baptismal certificate as "unknown" was probably a native Indian.

In 1911 James Grieg found in Raeburn's work "from his earliest to his latest period ... a great sanity of vision and subtle seizure of character expressed with unerring *impulsive* technique", that it "was as *spontaneous* in statement as it was sure in its appreciation of form dominated by temperament" and that "there is *no deviation* from the aims evident in the portraits of his youth". The Times critic (16.11.11) felt that "like many Scotsmen, Raeburn in intellect was much more French than English, and one feels that nearly all his best portraits are conceived as David or Ingres would have conceived them, but that the original conception is overlaid and obscured by English romanticism. Pure form is really his main interest but he cannot be content with it, he must try to enliven it with *sharp accents* or masses of light and shade and with incongruous romantic accessories". He goes on to say "Raeburn reminds one of Goya, and one feels it might have been as good as Goya if he had *not flinched* at the last moment from his natural precision of statement. It was that habit of flinching and of yielding to picturesque evasions which prevents him from being a master while no doubt it increases his popularity". After a 1815 Royal Academy exhibition the Sun critic said that "Mr Raeburn's manner is very peculiar" and that "he aims at grand effect by *broad and general means* and seems to despise the nicety of detail..." and that "there is also a *want of finish*". Even taking into consideration the shifts in critical relativities over the last century and a half it is hard to see how these statements could apply to the portrait of James Hay. Its smoothly modulated paint surfaces are neither impulsive nor spontaneous; still less is there any flinching in the above sense, want of finish, or sharp accents. We conclude that this portrait, thoroughly deserving the adjective "Goyaesque", is atypical and therefore of considerable interest.

T.G.



A recent acquisition.
William Powell Frith (1819-1909) British
La Marquise (Portrait of a Lady) 1885
Oil on canvas, 762x609mm. Acc.no. 1975/2
Signed (LR) W.P. Frith

Billy Apple in New Zealand

WYSTAN CURNOW

"There's no art which does not bear some burden of physicality. To deny it is to descend to irony".

"A desire to eliminate 'furniture' from art is not nihilistic. What does initially appear 'sterile' is an attitude that establishes nothing, produces little, and by its very nature, cancels out results. Also there is the gratuitousness of being unwilling to transform the world or accumulate in it. . . ."

Mel Bochner

The Reception.

Billy Apple's works made news most of the time he was here. In some four months over forty news items appeared in daily papers from Auckland to Invercargill; the Sunday press, the *Listener*, and the *National Business Review* also took note. He figured on local and network television some seven times, was interviewed by all Wellington's radio stations, some of them twice. Much of this attention was to some degree hostile, for in the 'public mind' his was controversial art. Apart from news items, more than twenty letters were published — there were seven in defence. Such a reaction was something new to the artist (in his home town of New York only an exclusive art press pays him much mind) and it was a reminder that there's still some art yet to pass from unacceptability to acceptance without an intervening period of appreciation, as Bernard Shaw would say. Such moments of controversy are valuable chiefly for the picture they afford of the character and structure of public attitudes to art.

All news is slanted. All news about art is criticism of a sort. Visiting expatriates who make good in the Big World are newsworthy because we are of the Little World, where nothing is of real significance. Artists who make good, here or there, are also news, because art has value — monetary, cultural, aesthetic value. But it gets complicated. Knowing next to nothing about art except that it is valuable and that most contemporary art violates whatever we imagine indicates quality in art, we report its achievements with a mixture of curiosity and outrage, but we *do* report it. How else do we explain the fact that the news media were as eager to report Billy Apple as they

were to subtly or not disparage his work in the process? The only item to merit Press Association release — it appeared in five newspapers — concerned the discovery by the New Plymouth Fire Brigade that the artist's work, "Neon Accumulation", at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery contravened fire safety regulations. Clearly, the Press relished the artist's embarrassment. Slanted and disparaging reportage was usually disguised as humour. In the passing on of information, smart word play is often self-serving and a form of disengagement. Commonly we find the reporter retreating from his task with cute innuendoes from which we are to infer: "they can't be serious; therefore, we won't be". The item, "Apple of his Own Eye", in the *New Plymouth Daily News*, begins:

Billy Apple, objet d'art, will put himself on display in New Plymouth in September. Bill is no ordinary artist; he is the apple of his own eye. . . .

That's to say, his works are bizarre acts of self-promotion by an exceptionally conceited man. Reading that he changed his name, took photos of himself and called these acts art, the reporter was apparently unable to do his job and withhold judgement. Distortion and confusion resulted. Knowing the artist was to talk about and show slides of his work during his visit, the reporter describes this as "an audio-visual display of himself." This to justify his punchy opening in the face of his later admission that the exhibition in fact would consist of an arrangement of neon tubing. Few items were as bad as this, but it was matched in its way by John Wilson's piece of apparently manufactured news in the *Sunday News* entitled "Billy Apple's Catching On" subtitled, "Modern art rip-off — what do you think?" Pictured are a fish hook and an empty frame, works by an anonymous artist said to be on sale at an unnamed Auckland gallery (for \$500) which were said to have received a mixed reception from unnamed art critics. Otherwise, the parade of jokes on the artist's name ("Pip Squeak", "Billy Apple's Pickings", "Neon Art Gives Some the Pip", "Peeling Off Billy Apple"), and inattention to detail (Christchurch was told that the British Council Retrospective consisted of eighty copies of what was in fact the New Zealand tour poster, Palmerston North got a description of the city Gallery show that totally confused the two works exhibited) betrayed the general attitude.

In the letters to the editor the disparagement is overt. Aside from its being humourless, C.M. Meads' letter to the *Taranaki Herald* is typical. He writes: "How could anyone place such an outrageous value of \$10,000 on that floodlit contorted broken-glass contraption? It's the most expensive rubbish I have ever laid my eyes on". The problem is this: once again the people who administer the holy places of art (which we build and maintain), have placed great value on something

which violates everything we imagine indicates value in art. Something must be seriously wrong. The "Tate and the Gluggenheim (sic) must be as silly as we are," writes N. Robinson. "If I scrub our kitchen floor particularly artistically this week *and* I know its exact dimensions, will the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council pay me to exhibit this work?" asks C. Nan Turner. Most are angry that no answer is forthcoming to their problem, few are as plain nasty as the correspondent from New York, who writes to the *National Business Review*:

"... surely the least Sir Hamish Keith can do, in his capacity of chairman of the Arts Council, is to find a way of spreading Mr Apple's "Bowel Movement" throughout New Zealand. Mr Apple's shit goes down a treat here. To deny it to his fellow countrymen would be a monstrous crime."

This lady was prompted by the *Review's* funny man, Ian F. Grant, who in fact expressed a sneaking admiration for an artist he assumed to be a con man. Grant conformed to a pattern: "Peter Pan" congratulated Billy Apple "for his tongue in cheek sculpture".

The artist was quoted as saying "you have to understand where contemporary art is at to get a full appreciation" of his work. Indeed, he said something similar on several occasions; he knew there was a problem, and his solution was the obvious one. The New Zealand public has had precious little opportunity to discover where contemporary art is at. Few local artists make it. Only one major exhibition of it has reached these shores, *Some Recent American Art* (1974), and that did not move out of Auckland. Of course it is not the artist's responsibility to provide such an understanding, it is the art critic's. He ought to know something of where it's been at for the last fifteen years and be able to bring it to bear on Billy Apple's work for the benefit of viewers. It was his job to put that work in context and make its purpose accessible, to make *appropriate* responses to it, the kind a viewer could check out. Sad to say, the critics — newspaper reviewers all, since that's the only kind we have — only managed to distinguish themselves from outraged letter writers by their greater fluency and cunning. With two not so notable exceptions, that is. The fairest writer of them all was John Summers of the *Christchurch Star*. But after a mockery of scrupulous description he, too, ended suggesting the show was a send up and a misuse of public funds. To be fair, he did give the viewer something to go on. Like this:

"I closed the door of this chaste womb of silence but by some omniscient provision the latch did not click, thus staving off the overwhelming numinous quality which supervenes when one "subtracts" all the noise of the century. A saving murmur trickled in from the main room."

That, with all its trite and cultivated facetiousness, expresses a

discomfort, a fear of being alone with, the work. And did he not himself represent enough noise for any century? No other reviewer made such a tellingly inappropriate response to Billy Apple. The *N.Z. Herald's* critic, in my opinion, made a fool of himself on page one when he appended a blank space to an upsidedown photograph of a corner of the Barry Lett Gallery that did not contain the subtracted alcove. The next day the photo was reprinted right way up with hollow apology. It stressed how few readers had picked their supposed booboo, how abstract paintings had often been exhibited upsidedown anyway. Implication was it made no difference. One would like to think the critic had been an innocent party to an editorial prank. In any case, three days later, there was a second review from Mr McNamara — an unprecedented occurrence. This time he made an effort: it may be about awareness; you're aware he wrote, of the room, and of the space subtracted. You're curious about what's behind the carpet. And he concluded: "Whether these perceptions are sufficient to make an achieved work of art is open to serious doubt, but no person should really pass judgement until he has exposed himself to them." The review was, in truth, desperately thin, but the attitude was exemplary in comparison with that of most of his colleagues. Dianna Dekker in the *Evening Post* spent her space on silly word play with the artist's statement. New Plymouth's expert on the *Daily News*, Denis Harold, made facetious comments on the artist's projected visit, managed a few thoughts on his lecture but did not manage to review the work which caused more fuss than any other. Only the *Auckland Star's* Peter Bromhead understood his job and made a real effort to do it. By discussing the artist as a sort of environmental Dadaist, he provided a serviceable context. His description of the work was to the point, his responses concrete. But in general the critics failed to deal with the viewer's problem; instead, they exacerbated it by authorizing his outrage. As so often happens, the amateur middleman under pressure became the carpetbagger of a consensus culture hostile to the demands of high art.

One correspondent congratulated the *Herald's* critic on his first review, the *Southland Times* actually made it an occasion for an editorial slanging all modern art. No correspondent or editor praised his second review which was, after all, not on page one but decently buried in the back pages. The only letters to seriously question newspaper criticism and coverage were, significantly, from artists or gallery directors: Don Peebles, Annella MacDougall (CSA Gallery), Peter Webb (Barrington Gallery) and Ron O'Reilly (Govett-Brewster Gallery). John Summers' answer to Peebles' complaint about "poorly informed 'funny man' of the media was that artists take themselves so seriously. Maybe they had better, because like as not no one else will.

Peebles also had TV in mind. Much of the abuse sustained by the artist came from people — within and without the media — who had seen none of his work. They had heard about it. The editor of the *Southland Times* claimed to be "in complete agreement" with McNamara's non-review, but under the circumstances his agreement was worthless. But it was TV rather than the press that contributed most to the pre-judgement of the artist's work. TV1's interview with the artist on its "Tonight at Nine" programme did him more damage than any other single event. Expecting coverage of his City Gallery works, he found footage cut so as to feature his "Excretory Wipings", (1970) which, torn from context, were reduced to sensational grist. He was as shocked in his own way as viewers were in their's: a fortnight later, in Wellington, he voiced to a reporter his objections to "the media's sensationalism of much of his work. Asked about press and public reaction to one of his works — 'Bowel Movement on a Tissue Paper' (sic) — he clammed up. 'I don't want to talk about that. In fact I don't want to be here at all.' " Doubtless, the artist's innocence contributed to his downfall; but someone in the network was sufficiently concerned over the item, he sought to make amends and present the artist decently on "Grunt Machine" — a heavy rock programme and the nearest TV1 came to an arts programme. The damage had been done, however; by the time he left Auckland to tour the country, New Zealand had him taped, his arrivals were preceded by knowing attitudes.

In Christchurch TV2 took its turn as villain. TV1's news team had just finished with the CSA work when their rivals arrived. Since the gallery lighting was vital, the crew's lights had been a problem. One which was eventually solved with the artist's supervision. TV2 (Rodney Bryant) brushing aside offers of TV1's lighting, the artist's co-operation and a request to film the work without a viewer in view, set up their own lights and proceeded to shoot a vaudeville send up of the work. The following evening TV2 acknowledged the artist's complaint that their lighting had misrepresented his piece and had the infinite gall to show a blank screen and claim that that was how the work would have appeared without their lights. Viewers were then invited to contact Hamish Keith who would give them \$200 to do an empty room. Precisely the kind of treatment given expert sanction by Summers' review two days later.

It goes without saying a critic's got a duty to narrow the gap of understanding between himself and his readers. As most of our critics found no gap I guess they abdicated their role to that extent. But above and beyond that it is their job to interpose themselves between artist and public, to maintain *that* gap and so afford the genuine artist the psychic insulation he needs to do *his* job. A public reaction as

volatile and as irrelevant as that which greeted Billy Apple's work constituted a threat to the artistic enterprise. One that, in the event, was finally carried out in Dunedin.

The Arts Council, which organised the tour, and the galleries which put on the exhibitions, provided a situation in which the artist's work might be understood. Their interest presupposed some understanding and a judgement: the works were worthy. It was an interest taken in the sure knowledge that the work would prove controversial. These institutions are critics, and they, more than reviewers are in the business of providing psychic insulation. Commissioning the works, providing the materials, work space, a public, living expenses and so on, they gave the artist the security to do what he liked, to do his job. So there was a stand-off. The critical judgement of the media, the art critics, and the public, versus those of these institutions.

Or so it might appear. In truth, the situation was more complex, and more desperate than that. Only in Auckland and New Plymouth were municipal art galleries prepared to support the tour. Such galleries are accountable to other institutions, and four that had initially committed themselves pulled out at the last minute. The two North Island provincial galleries which were to have been the artist's first hosts withdrew. Both the Manawatu Art Gallery and the McDougall Gallery were advertised as venues on the tour poster. Shortly before he arrived in Palmerston North, the artist learnt the Gallery had no room for him. When he got there he found that the Director was himself unavailable and that he faced the task of finding, with the help of the gym teacher, space at the local Teacher's College — the new venue. For its part the McDougall Gallery, rather mysteriously, pleaded lack of staff and the artist was shifted to the CSA. It's to be noted that all four galleries committed themselves to the tour before the media had begun to have its say. Apparently the support structure is far from firm when under pressure.

In Dunedin it simply collapsed. The day before opening day, the Otago Arts Society told the artist he was not to remove anything from its main gallery. Not the chairs, not the concrete blocks, not the large easel on wheels, not the dais. No self-respecting exhibitor could be happy about such clutter, but in this case the stipulation was tantamount to a refusal of access to space previously offered. The artist told the Society he could not present a work unless they changed their minds, and left his phone number. Up to this point no member of the Society's executive had either met or spoken to the artist; none ever did. The Chairman of the Southern Regional Arts Council and the Q.E. II Southern representative were contacted; both disclaimed responsibility. Q.E. II's representative eventually intervened: the

Society would now co-operate, but only if the items were professionally removed and stored at the artist's expense! There was, of course, no exhibition, and the artist left town.

There's something about cultural geography in all this. The South Island has long been almost well-bred in its persistent amateurism, the North almost professional in its sprawling — vulgarity, should we call it? Matter-of-factness and restraint from Dunedin's press (they called him *Mr* Billy Apple, whereas to New Plymouth he was plain Billy'— a case of contempt breeding familiarity) sorted oddly with the Arts Society's know-nothingness. Why they accepted the show in the first place is a source of mystery. How much did the Arts Council tell these galleries, and how much do they find out before they make their commitments? Anyway, it was Arts Societies in the South, and commercial and municipal galleries in the North which took on the tour. And furthest North is Auckland, New Zealand's New York, its art capital. Only there did the artist show three new works. (It might have been four had the Barrington Galleries been able to fit him in.) Only there was he reviewed in both newspapers. And only there could his work be seen not just in the context of related local art but also of his wife's work. Jacki Apple exhibited at the Barrington and Barry Lett Galleries. It was in New Plymouth that the stand-off really developed. There Billy Apple came in for more attention and hostility than in the rest of the country put together. From the press, the Fire Brigade, vandals and irate City Councillors. There, too, a new director, following in the footsteps of his adventurous and professionally-minded predecessors stood firmly and publicly behind his commitment, accepted the gift of the work on display and proposed to organise a tour of the artist's British Council exhibition.

It may be hard to credit that the artist was surprised and distressed by the attention and hostility which greeted his work. That work does, after all, knowingly violate viewer expectations. And Auckland is, after all, no New York. His innocence was, however, genuine. No doubt it reflected the peculiar provincialism of New York, the long-standing and effective psychic insulation that goes with being the art capital of the world. There an artist's anxieties may be confined to his own work, to how it relates within the art community. He may be concerned about the economics and politics of the immense support system, but not with whether or not it exists. By and large only full beneficiaries of the support structure get media coverage, and Billy Apple is not one of these. There again, the insulation is such that innovation is institutionalised to the point where its authors are seldom exposed to the public misconceptions it occasions. Americans have no greater understanding of Billy Apple's

work than do New Zealanders, what they do have is a support structure for high art that is second to none. The violation of viewer expectation is addressed to "the Tradition of the New", to art history, and only incidentally to a public disoriented by all modern art. And so it is by a typical irony that works so distinctively generous come to be seen as an affront to public taste.

A Diary

MAY

25: arrives, Auckland.

JUNE

7: *New Zealand Herald*. Item headed "Unusual Ideas Bear Fruit". Story based on interview with the artist.

JULY

Following initiatives from the Auckland City Art Gallery, the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council begins (mid-July) to organise a national tour during which the artist will give lectures and present works at public galleries.

23: Lecture/slide presentation to students at the School of Fine Arts, Auckland University.

Lecture/slide presentation to New Zealand Society of Sculptors and Painters, School of Fine Arts.

29: *The Daily News* (New Plymouth) Item headed "Apple of his own Eye". Story based on *Listener* interview and comments of R.N. O'REILLY, Director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, concerning the artist's forthcoming visit to the city.

30: Exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery opens. Two works: "8 x 8: A Subtraction", "Untitled".

31: *NZ Herald*. Item headed "Sweeping Lines to New Art", Photograph of "8 x 8" accompanied by brief description of the two works.

AUGUST

2: *The New Zealand Listener*. "Billy Apple's art of living". Story by FRANCES PARKIN based on interview with the artist.

: *Daily News*. Item in DENIS HAROLD'S *Visual Art* column announcing artist's visit to the city in late September.

7: *The Dominion*. Item headed "Two neon sculptures Showing". On the artist's visit to Wellington early September sponsored by the New Zealand Academy.

8: *Herald*. Letter headed "Billy Apple", signed SICKENED; a reaction to "8 x 8".

9: *Herald*. Letter headed "Sub Art", signed DAUBIER; reaction (abusive) to "8 x 8".

- 13: Exhibition at Auckland City Art Gallery closes. The artist gives a lunch hour lecture/slide presentation there.
Herald. Letter headed "Billy Apple", signed PETER WEBB, Director, Harrington Gallery. A reply to SICKENED.
- 18: TV2. Artist is guest on afternoon programme, "Speakeasy".
- 19: TV1. Interview with artist on "Tonight at Nine".
- 23: *Taranaki Herald* (New Plymouth). Letter headed "Artist's Visit to City", signed SANITY: a reaction (abusive) to TV1 interview.
 : *Listener*. Letter headed "Billy Apple's pickings", signed JOHN L.A. PENDREIGH. Abusive.
- 24: *Dominion Sunday Times*, (Wellington) Item headed "Billy Apple's Secret". On the artist's planned exhibition in New Plymouth with comments from R.N. O'REILLY.
- 27: *National Business Review*. Item headed "Pip Squeak", in IAN F. GRANT'S column (comic) "Inside Down Under". Reaction to TV1 interview.
 (Artist's visit to Gisborne & Napier cancelled at the last minute.)

SEPTEMBER

- 2: *Christchurch Press*. Item headed "Apple's Art". Extracted from *Sunday Times* story of August 24.
- 5: Arrives in Wellington.
- 6: *Dominion*. Item headed "Apple pipped". Attempted interview. Report of artist being refused bar service on grounds of improper dress and of forthcoming exhibition and lecture. Photograph of the artist.
- 7: Exhibition at Taj Mahal Gallery opens. "Neon Accumulation, 1968".
 : Lecture/slide presentation at Downstage Theatre.
- 8: Z2B, 2ZM, 2YA (Wellington). Artist interviewed at Taj Mahal.
- 9: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Gallery Dates", gives September 20-25 for artist's New Plymouth show.
- 13 *Listener*. Letter headed "Billy Apple's pickings", signed c. NAN TURNER, Christchurch. Abusive.
- 14 Exhibition at Taj Mahal closes.
- 15 Leaves Wellington, arrives Palmerston North.
- 16 *Evening Standard* (Palmerston North). Item headed "Artist Billy Prefers to Erase his Mark. . .". Artist interviewed on his visit to the city. Photograph of the artist.
 : Exhibition at Palmerston North Teachers' Training College opens. Untitled.
- 17: Lecture/slide presentation at Training College.
- 18: Exhibition at Training College closes.
- 19: Leaves Palmerston North, arrives New Plymouth.
- 20: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Billy is Serious". Story based on interview with the artist while at work on his exhibition. Photograph of the artist.

- : *Daily News*. Item headed "Aims of Apple's Artistry". Artist interviewed prior to opening of his exhibition.
- : Exhibition at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Opens. "Neon Accumulation, 1968".
 : *Listener*. Letter headed "Billy Apple's pickings", signed WYSTAN CURNOW. Abusive reply to JOHN L.A. PENDREIGH'S letter.
- 21: Lecture/slide presentation at the Govett-Brewster Gallery.
- 22: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Obscenity Added to Apple Work". Unknown viewer sketches four letter word in broken glass. Photograph of the work.
 : *Daily News*. Item headed "Contrasting Art Exhibitions", signed D.H. (DENIS HAROLD) Review of exhibition and lecture.
- 25: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Free Offer to Gallery". Reports artist's gift of "Neon Accumulation, 1968", to Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
 : Letter headed "Broken Glass at Gallery", signed H.s. KINGSTON. Asks loaded questions about the work.
 : *Daily News*. Item headed "He Even Threw in the Instructions". Report of gift, with photograph of the work.
- 26: Leaves New Plymouth, arrives Auckland.
 : *Taranaki Herald*. Letter headed "Billy Apple Sculpture", signed R.N. O'REILLY. Answers H.S. Kingston's questions.
 : *Daily News*. Item headed "Neon Art Gives Some the Pip". Photograph of visitors to exhibition with a selection of their amused, puzzled and annoyed reactions. Local artists (DON DRIVER. MICHAEL SMITHER) quoted: favourable reactions.
- 27: *Taranaki Herald*. Letters, headed "Billy Apple Exhibition", signed ENON. IQ 75, SUZIE BANANA. JUST INTERESTED. All but the last abusive.
 : TV1. Evening News (network) coverage of New Plymouth show.
 : *Herald*. Item in "Arts Column" announcing forthcoming show at Barry Lett Galleries.
- 29: *Taranaki Herald*. Letters, headed "Exhibition at Gallery", signed c.M. MEADS. N. ROBINSON: both abusive.
 : *Daily News*. Letter signed SLZIE BANANA (as in Herald).
 : Exhibition at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, opens. Work entitled "28.054 Cubic Metres: A Subtraction".
- 30: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Neon Snag". Reports Fire Brigade complaint concerning "Neon Accumulation". Scattered down exit stairway, it blocks fire exit. Gallery required to dismantle it. The artist will return to reassemble it elsewhere in the Gallery.
 : Letter headed "Exhibition at Gallery", signed WILLIAM PEAR, abusive.
 : *Herald*. Item headed "Subtract Art". Photograph of the work printed upside down. Caption includes description and blank space following a request for the Herald critic's opinion.

OCTOBER

- : In the first week of October negotiations for an item on TV1's "Grunt Machine" fall through as a result of the artist's request to be present at the editing.
- 1: *Herald*. Item headed "Not Many Picked This One". Photograph of October 30 reprinted the right way up. Ungracious admission of error.
 - : *Evening Post* (Wellington) Item headed "Billy Apple Sculpture Annoyed Fire Brigade". PA release of "Neon Snag".
 - : *Hawera Star*: PA release.
 - : *Hawkes Bay Herald-Tribune* (Hastings) PA release.
 - : *Daily News*. PA release.
 - Letter headed "Apple's Work", signed P.L. MULLER; abusive.
 - : *Taranaki Herald*. Letter headed "Exhibit at Gallery", signed PETER PAN; abusive.
- 2: *The Auckland Star*. Item headed "Ideas Remain Sound but Project Fails". Review signed PETER BROMHEAD.
- 4: *The Southland Times*. (Invercargill) Editorial headed "Painted Out". Jeune meditations on modern art occasioned by *NZ Herald's* art critic's blank space review of "28.054 Cubic Metres".
 - : *Herald*. Item headed "Apple Art Essay in Awareness", Review of "28.054 Cubic Metres", signed T.J. MCNAMARA.
- 5: *Sunday News*. Item headed "Billy Apple's Catching On", signed JOHN WILSON. "Apparently bogus story about the exhibition of a fish hook and an empty picture frame. Joke at the expense of "modern art rip-offs".
- 6: *Daily News*. Letter headed "Billy Apple's 'Neon Accumulation' ", signed R.N. O'REILLY. A lengthy letter in reply to "Neon Art Gives Some the Pip", September 26.
- 8 *Herald*. Letter headed "Eloquent Silence", signed S. EDGE. Praise for MCNAMARA'S blank-space review of "28.054 Cubic Metres".
- 10 Exhibition at Barry Lett Galleries closes.
- 13 Leaves Auckland, arrives Christchurch.
- 14 Exhibition at the Canterbury Society of Arts Gallery opens. Untitled work.
- 15 *Auckland Star*. Letter headed "Art Exhibition", signed T. RING; abusive.
 - : *The Christchurch Press*. Item headed "Uncluttered" in *Reporter's Diary* column. Description of work at CSA Gallery, with photograph of it.
 - : *Christchurch Star*. Item headed "Billy's Spaced Out Exhibition", reports on CSA show and interview with artist.
 - : *TVI*. Network coverage of CSA work.
 - : *TV2*. Local news coverage of CSA work.
- 16 Lecture/slide presentation at Christchurch Teachers' Training College.
 - : *TV2*. Further local news coverage of CSA show.
 - : (*Listener* rejects my review of "28.054 Cubic Metres.")

- 18: *Christchurch Press*. In *Points of Viewing*, TV columnist takes TV2 to task for coverage of CSA show.
 - : *Christchurch Star*. Item headed "Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder". Review of CSA show signed JOHN SUMMERS.
 - : Leaves Christchurch, arrives Dunedin.
- 20: *Otago Daily Times*. (Dunedin) Item headed "Controversial Mr Apple's Exhibition Failed to Open". Report on non-opening of the artist's show at the Otago Society of Arts because of a dispute between the artist and the Society.
 - : *The Evening Star*. (Dunedin) Item headed "Society Waits for Artist".
 - : *TVI*. Local news coverage of Dunedin fiasco.
- 21 *Otago Daily Times*. Item headed "Dunedin Exhibition by Artist in Doubt".
 - : *Christchurch Star*. Letter headed "Billy Apple's Art", signed DON PEBBLES. Objects to media treatment of the artist.
 - : *Herald*. Letter headed "Subtract Art", signed DAVID BARKER. From Helsinki; abusive.
 - : *Evening Star* (Dunedin). Item headed "Billy Apple Leaving Town".
- 22 Leaves Dunedin.
- 23 *Christchurch Star*. Letter headed "Billy Apple Reviews", and signed ANNELLA MACDOUGAL, Director, Canterbury Society of Arts Gallery. Objects to review. Reviewer's reply follows.
- 24: CSA Exhibition closes.
- 29: arrives New Plymouth.
 - : *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Billy Apple Back". Reports artist's return to re-assemble "Neon Accumulation, 1968".
 - : *Daily News*. Item headed "Billy's Back to do it Again".
- 30: Exhibition of "Neon Accumulation, 1968, Part 2", opens at Govett-Brewster Gallery.

NOVEMBER

- 2: Leaves New Plymouth, arrives Auckland.
- 4: *Dominion*. Item headed "Artist Apple to Hold Seminars". Report on seminars organised by Victoria University of Wellington, Dept. of University Extension to be held at the University.
- 5: *National Business Review*. Letter headed "Peeling off Billy Apple", signed GRANNY SMITH. From a New York reader; abusive.
- 7: arrives in Wellington from Auckland.
 - : *Otago Daily Times*. Letter headed "Billy Apple", signed THINKING. Questions the Otago Society of Arts wanting Arts Council money to pay storage on items the artist wanted removed from Gallery.
- 8: Exhibition at the Wellington Settlement Gallery opens. Untitled work.
 - : Seminar for Department of University Extension.
- 9: *2YC*. Artist interviewed.
 - : Seminar for Department of University Extension.

- 10: *ZM*. Artist interviewed by LLOYD SCOTT.
- 11: *2XW, Radio Windy*. Talk-back with MURRAY FORCIE.
- 12: *2YA*. Artist interviewed by NEIL ROWE.
- 14: Exhibition at Wellington Settlement Gallery closes.
- 15: *Evening Post*. Item headed "It is but it isn't but it is but..." signed DIANA DEKKER. Review of Settlement Gallery exhibition.
- 18: *Daily News*. Item headed "Win Wants to Bill Billy". New Plymouth City Councillor WIN ELLIOTT moves motion to have "Neon Accumulation, 1968" removed from the gallery. Motion fails for want of a seconder.
: *Taranaki Herald*. Item headed "Gallery Becomes Laughing Stock, says Councillor".
- 20: *Daily News*. Letters headed "Laughing Stock" signed JOY E. PECKHAM (abusive) and N.B. COLLINS (supportive).
: leaves Wellington for Auckland.
- 27: *Auckland Star*. Item headed "Some Got the Pip". Artist interviewed for thoughts on his visit.
- 29: *Listener*. Letter headed "Billy's Apples", signed J.A. HOOKER (Dunedin). Uses artist as stick to beat T.L. RODNEY WILSON'S *Listener* review of two Christchurch sculptors.
- 30: leaves Auckland for New York.

The works

Billy Apple's works took place, and returned it. They've gone for good. The places remain, willy nilly. The works survive only as photographs and as remembered experiences. Unlike much of his output of the early 60s and 70s which was exhibited only in documentary form, these works make a peculiar appeal to the critic: to his sense of power and of responsibility. For photographs freeze only random portions of a viewer's experience, so that it is left to the critic alone, through his exemplary account, to preserve that experience, to resist the willful ephemerality of the works. He is to see to it that they retain their being in the body of that account. Through its fullness and concreteness, perhaps. We assume that our experiences of works which are permanent objects check out, they are repeatable and to that extent permanent too. And there's a resemblance, ontologically, between our experiences of ephemeral works and the works themselves, they too have gone for good. Whatever was good about them must be singled out by circling them in memory, multiplying the angles, opening them up to consciousness that they may be reclaimed for consciousness. Perhaps the critic should always behave as if the works he discusses were impermanent.

Billy Apple presented three new works in Auckland. Two were exhibited at the City Art Gallery and one, titled *28.054 Cubic Metres: A Subtraction*, at the Barry Lett Galleries. I spent time with each of them, whereas those shown in Palmerston North, Christchurch, and Wellington, I know only from photographs and for that reason will have less to say about them. Since they are, however, the outcome of the Auckland works, the experiences the documents suggest may be guessed.

But first works first. The City Gallery has two first floor galleries which open on to each other through a large doorway (16'9" wide) roughly midway along the wall that divides them. The walls of both are white and floor tiles a deep brown. Each gallery occasioned, but neither completely contained, a single work. How was this? Where and what were these works? Well, noting that the West gallery was somewhat longer than the East, Billy Apple "subtracted" the offending space by painting out the requisite number of floor tiles with white paint.* When the viewer reached a position from which to judge the discrepancy, it disappeared. When he passed that point — that is, when he passed the doorway and his angle of vision revealed clearly the floor area at the end of the West gallery, the illusion was lost and the "work" disclosed itself. Disclosed itself *as* the intention to subtract the very space it occupied. In order to make these discoveries, the viewer had to have had in view at some stage the end walls of both galleries, so in a sense the work must be said to have occupied the space of both galleries.

In the East gallery, he chose an area of floor eight tiles long by eight tiles wide and removed the wax polish from it.** Again, the approach was important: no matter how you entered its space, this area was positioned at an equal distance from either side of your entry. Again, as a piece easily "overlooked" it disclosed itself as you got closer to it and your angle of vision on it grew less acute. Because the centrality of the piece was most fully met with coming upon it through the doorway from the West gallery, it seemed that this work also claimed both galleries for its space. In this respect the two works overlapped or intersected each other. What appeared at first to be two large empty gallery spaces came to be two large gallery spaces filled twice over by the artist's works. Such a conclusion puts paid to a first impression: subtraction? Nothing on the walls, no art objects — it's the art that's been subtracted from this art space. The art space was full, full of art of some description.

He has worked with floor tiles before. Of the two, the East gallery piece relates most directly to previous work. *Negative Condition Situation: Cleaning* (1973), for instance. That involved the cleaning of a



1

single dirty floor tile with his good eye, the one with normal 20/20 vision, covered. An art activity to be experienced as a document, it is the idea of the work taking place that counts. On the other hand, with *9 x 9: A Subtraction (Washing)*, 1974, it is the place that counts. Again, an area of dirty floor was cleaned.¹ Measuring nine tiles by nine tiles, it got its area from that of individual tiles — they measured nine inches by nine inches. The effect of this kind of composing is anti-compositional, it reduces the significance of any part at the expense of the whole. Producing as it does various modular, serial and grid formats which point away from the work itself and toward the acts of making-or seeing it, the procedure is a commonplace of contemporary painting and sculpture. This particular work points away from itself in this way: the area cleaned was in the centre of the gallery space. Just as the character of the surface (clean) was related to the character of the surrounding area ('dirty'), so the surface area (9×9) was related to that of the surrounding area (the whole gallery floor). The work derived not only from the part but also from the whole of the space in which it found itself. Obviously 9×9 is the parent of 8×8 : *A Subtraction*, the East gallery piece.² City Gallery tiles measure eight inches by eight inches and the unwaxed area was eight tiles by eight tiles.

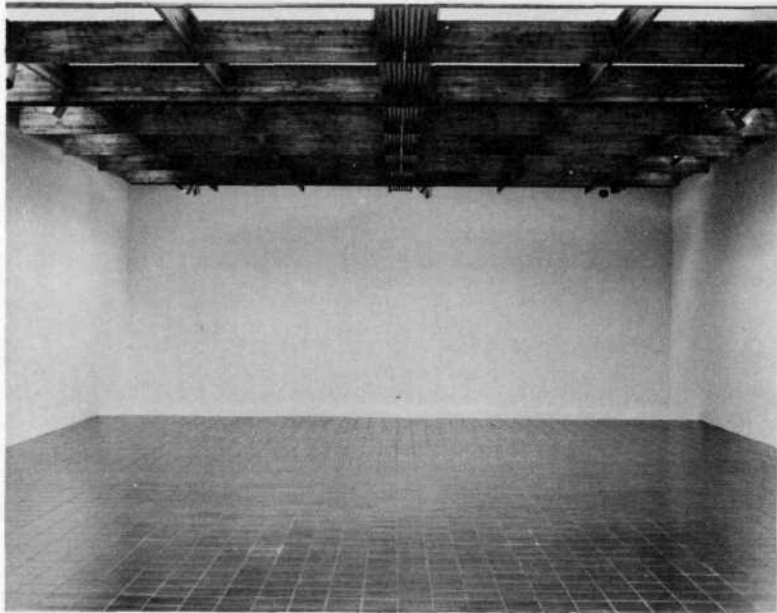
Actually, the number eight is of particular significance here.



2

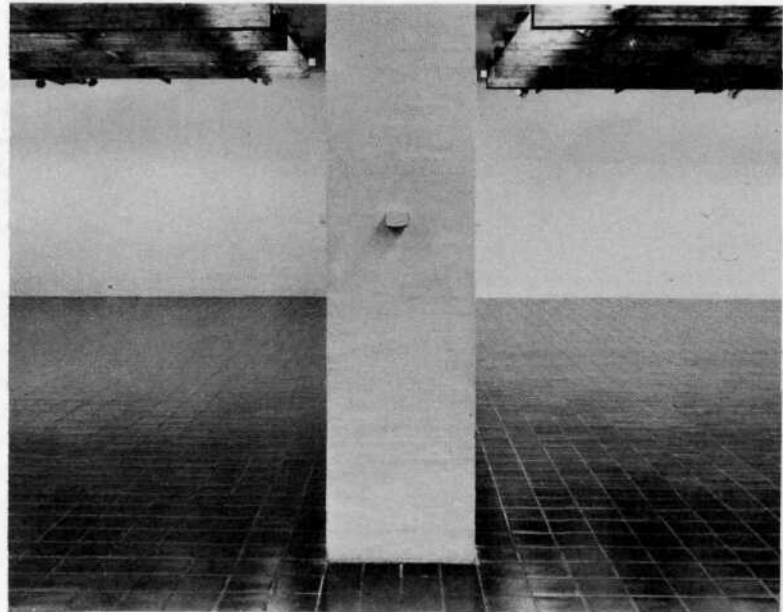
Because the work was also eight full tiles distant from either side of the doorway, and because the white area painted in the West gallery was also eight tiles deep — that being precisely the number of tiles by which it exceeds in length the East gallery. That's coincidence certainly. But in a work of this kind, one which must derive from the givens of the space that it is in, coincidence may become inseparable from intention. Another measure of the artist's mastery of a situation not of his own making. 9×9 involved the calculated coincidence of measures. But with 8×8 there was no way of saying for sure whether the area of unpolished tile was determined, like 9×9 , by measuring a single tile, or by counting the number of tiles across the doorway and across the gallery's width, whether it was deduced from the part or the whole. Nor is there need to know. The fact that either calculation would have yielded the same result is, however, worth knowing since it points up a coherence that is at once of the work itself and of the gallery. A coherence, what is more, 9×9 doesn't match.

Like what are called minimal sculptures, these pieces are not hermetic objects; what is to be had from them resides not *in* them but in the situation in which they find themselves. The situation in which *we* find them. But Billy Apple's works aren't even objects. They make their presence felt not by adding something to the situation but by removing something from it. As a result they are more deeply and



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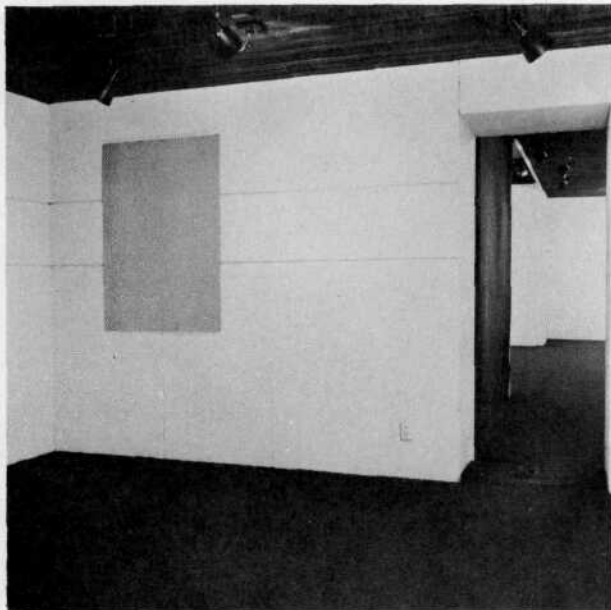
specifically *of* their situation than are minimal objects. What is the meaning of this subtraction? We've noted it is not art that is subtracted and how these works relate specifically to their situation. What is subtracted? First off, subtracting dirt would seem to mean one thing, subtracting wax polish another. Previous work evinces an abiding passion for cleanliness — personal, domestic, urban. There emerges, from a whole series of art "activities" — especially those undertaken between 1970 and 1973 — a figure who engages with his world almost exclusively as a cleaner of sorts, complex, and with his mind on higher things. Wax polish, however, protects tiles, facilitates their maintenance; its removal has to be a blow to a cleaner. Is it that the cleaner's work is never done, then? That this cleaning is as much a prophecy of dirt to come as a dispossession of the dirt that is? These questions are, in effect, formulated by the artist, recognised by the viewer and answered, eventually, by those who manage the exhibition space and who must themselves subtract the subtraction when the show is over. "Like life itself, my art is transitional: a function of its environment. It is temporarily separate, only to be redigested again by the processes of life."³ Subtraction, then, the sign of a process, a process begun before and extended beyond the term of the exhibition. Wax or dirt? It's immaterial, a function of the specific art space. 9x9 belongs to those adversary art spaces, the lofts and warehouses of New



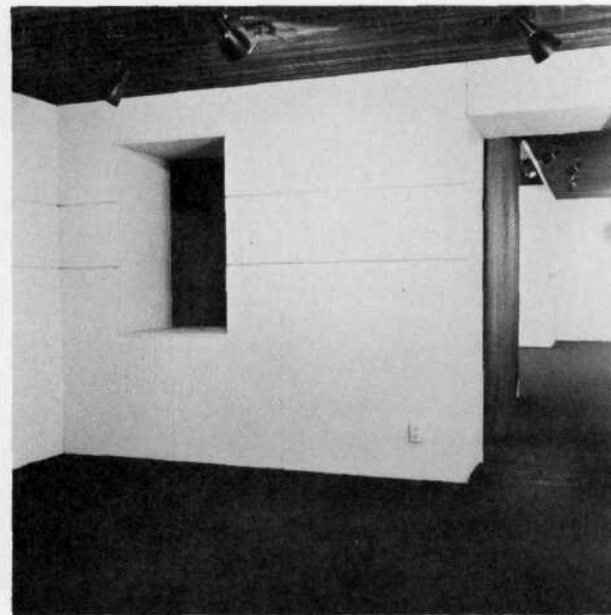
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York; 8 x 8 to the well-appointed art spaces of the City Gallery⁴ That said, this much can be claimed: subtraction signifies that the work has taken place but must soon surrender it. That the work is about change; in its literal submission to change, it is about it. Secondly, then this process projects certain purposes as matters of fact. For another instance: these works express a highly solicitous attitude to surfaces. And, by extension, to spaces. It was there in the discovery that these works managed to "fill" the space of both galleries. I found that 8x8 made entering the space of the East gallery, from the West especially, less an anomalous experience than it usually is. That the West gallery work aligned the end walls of both galleries, accentuated their equal length and, up to a point, squared off the entire exhibition area. Both works embodied a great concern for spatial order and simplicity.

Of the two, it was the West gallery work which dealt most directly with space. It tackled a problem that might have asked too much of the artist's resources: that of subtracting not a patina, but a volume. Since the solution it provided amounted to an important development in the artist's work and dictated the direction the rest of his New Zealand work was to take, its implications are worth chasing up. The problem was real enough; obvious answers suggest a three-dimensional structure and Billy Apple's works lie low for very good reasons. Wondering, wandering where they are serves to



introduce their terms of reference. That first impression — of art having been removed from an art space — is one worth preserving while one is with the work. Art works take their conventional places — hung up on walls, pedestalled up toward eye level — with a view to removing art space from the art so that the viewer is drawn without hindrance into the fictive space of the art object. Taking place at floor level, at right angles to the viewer, these works disrupt, escape beneath, expectations of placement that makes of walls and objects metaphors of some other place. Billy Apple's recent work is meaningful only in terms of *this* place, of the relations it sets up with the space that is literally continuous with that of the viewer at the time he views it. The floor pieces suggest that the three-dimensional object tends to release the viewer from the art space. If Morris's and Judd's objects of the mid-sixties argue against such extreme apprehensions, the hollowness of many of them, argues for them. What's at stake really is the integrity of a literalist aesthetic. And integrity in both senses of the word. Because, in as much as the retreat from the fictive world of the art object comes from an uncompromising insistence on experience as the ground for values, it is nothing if not moralistic. Much may depend on how the work loads the terms for or against the subject, the viewer. In this regard Billy Apple's floor pieces are distinctively and extremely generous. Subtraction also signifies



generosity, a solicitous attitude toward the viewer.

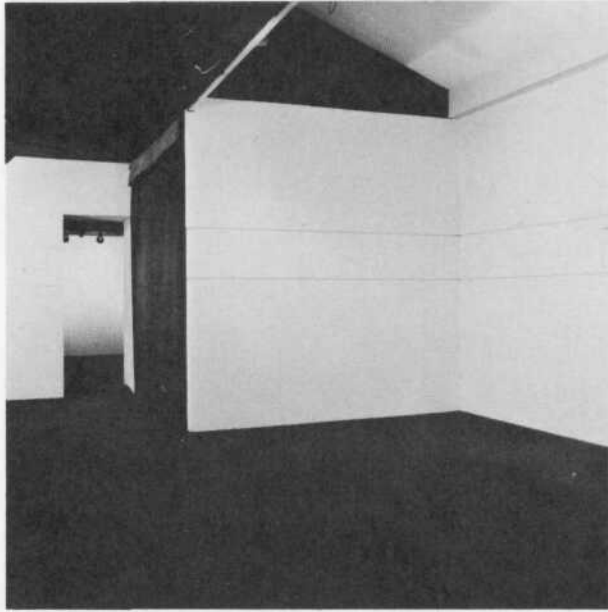
Like this: I, for one, had not been aware of the spatial anomalies to be found on the first floor of the City Gallery. Not that I'd had occasion, but the artist had. In theory, he might have satisfied his concern for spatial order by physically correcting, removing, them. Had he done so, however, the result would not have been a subtraction as he understands it:

The result of subtraction is absence.

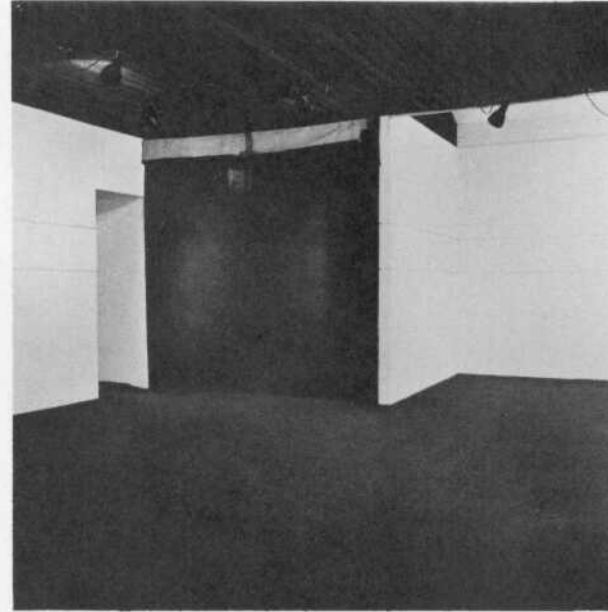
But absence cannot be defined as the result of subtraction, the reason being that absence does not necessarily imply that there was anything there to begin with.⁵

It would have been something like an absence. My discovery of the anomalies was simultaneous with that of their subtraction and of equal importance. The same actions that acquaint me with the artist's concern for order reveal to me the disorderliness of the space I'm in. These works do not order me about but invite me to participate in their purposes. They imply that a three-dimensional object will load the terms the other way, be less generous. They leave room for the viewer to be himself in the face of the work.

The West gallery work has origins in the last two pieces the artist exhibited prior to his departure for New Zealand: *Diagonal Subtraction (Sanding)* and *Five Connective Subtractions*. Both involved cleaning strips



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of floor suggested by pillars that divide a room space. As solutions to the problem of subtracting volume they succeed but are tentative compared to the present work.⁶ For, by doing what he'd not done before, by *adding* a patina to the floor that was the same colour as the walls, he hit upon a solution superb in its simplicity and uncompromising in its adherence to the virtues of the floor pieces.⁷ 8x8 came at the total space of the gallery by way of the surrounding floor area, whereas this piece went straight to three walls and met the three dimensions of the art space head on, on their own terms. I can see why the solution was worth seeking: it made for a far more direct identification of work and situation, an altogether cleaner statement of purpose. By comparison, the previous works fought shy of the viewer.

In one sense *28.054 Cubic Metres: A Subtraction* was the boldest subtraction of volume. As it was, the carpeted floor of the gallery limited the options. When it comes to subtracting haircord I guess there aren't any half-measures. More importantly, the recalcitrant irregularity of the Barry Lett Galleries provoked the artist into doing something about its volume. Otherwise, the success of the West gallery piece, and the subtraction of a classroom at the Palmerston North Teachers' College a month later, doubtless gave him a certain confidence. In any event, this work had, untypically, the force of a gesture. The alcove of the main gallery was subtracted by lifting up

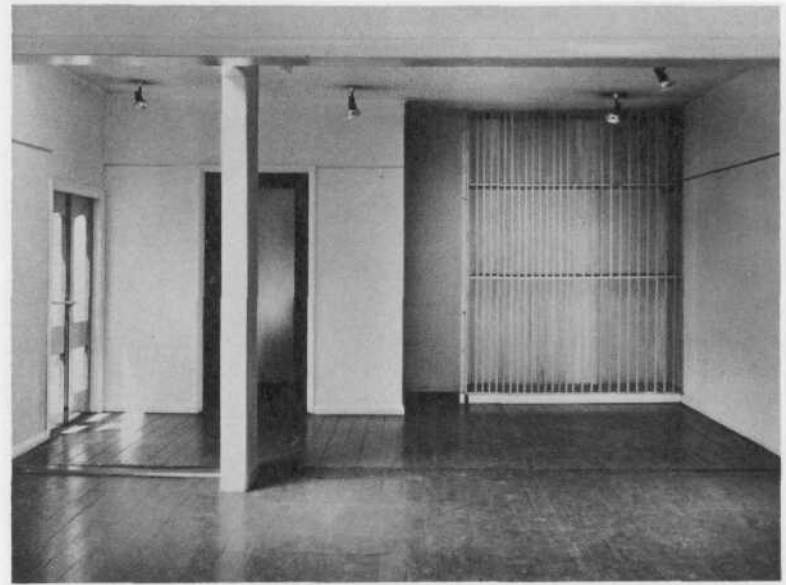
the carpet of the alcove and fixing it — with the original tacks — to the ceiling at the point where the alcove begins.* * * This alcove has a server-type window that opens into the front gallery. Initially it was covered with a sheet of ply but shortly after the exhibition opened, the artist, wisely I'd say, removed it, leaving only the single and clearly revealed gesture of the lifted carpet.

The impact of this simple act on the gallery space was impressive. Again, the work was easy to miss at first. The viewer walked straight past it, headed for his position for art viewing, and there it was by the door after all; off in the corner of an otherwise empty art space. And not *in* the corner so much as *being* the corner. And being that, it in fact reduced the number of corners in the gallery and so made the space more uniform. Nevertheless, *28.054* seemed less successful when measured against the West gallery piece. For one thing, it did less to or for the total space of the gallery. Its presence generated for the viewer a less rich, a less complete, experience of the situation. For another, there was a less direct identification of work and situation. Still looking to the floor for solutions to volumetric problems, and finding carpet, he had again converted floor to wall, not through illusion and implication this time, but literally. And, instead of wall colour interrupting floor space, it was floor colour that interrupted wall space. The result was a less self-effacing and



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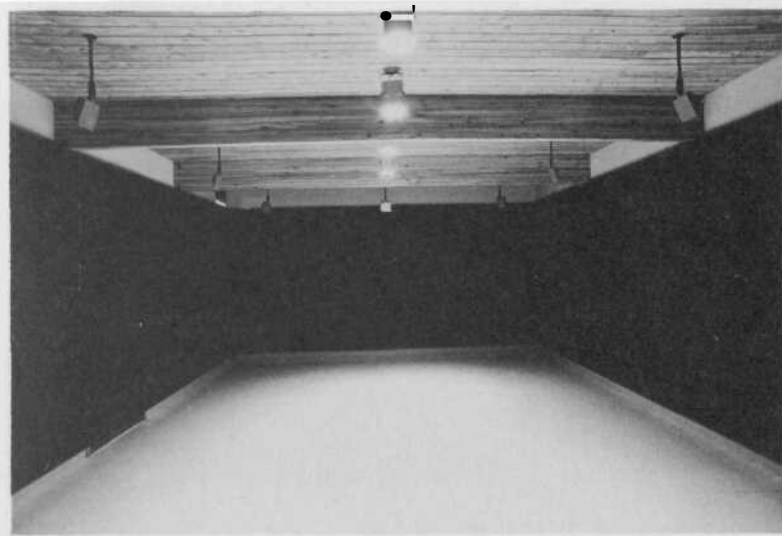
accommodating statement. The threadbare patches, the fold at the ceiling, the mark of a desk leg, traces of cigarette ash — all indicated where the carpet came from and let us infer the volume subtracted, all were evidence of the gesture that had taken place and interest in them was to that extent necessary. But the large black patch of carpet tended as such, to draw attention to itself and away from the situation. To impersonate painting. The same point can be made about the view from the front gallery — a view, incidentally, that did nothing for the space of that gallery. When the servery hole was covered the work acquired that air of aloofness and mysterious internality common to sculpture before Tallin and Gabo. Uncovered, the volume that had been subtracted, hidden from view in the main gallery, was revealed and the sense of the work as gesture, as part of a process, was reinforced. But lit only from the light of the front gallery, the alcove space still had an air of mystery that again drew attention to the work at the expense of the situation. The artist seemed to have captured that space and kept it to himself. He'd captured it, measured it with care, and placed the label beneath the servery hole: *28.054 Cubic Metres*. Such a feeling about the work doesn't dominate, is kept in check by the particularly emphatic way this piece shows a work has taken place and is about to surrender it. As an attempt to subtract volume, however, it runs into just those problems the West gallery



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piece managed to avoid. The truth is, I suspect, that Barry Lett Galleries resisted the role of the found situation too successfully. Just so long as the artist relied as heavily on the specifics of the found situation as he did in these works, that was bound to happen sometime.

With the other new works — those at Palmerston North, Christchurch, and Wellington (the Settlement Gallery) — he seemed to have avoided that reliance. What did they subtract? For a start, the art was missing, more than usually missing. What had previously taken place did not take place: as if the Auckland exhibitions had opened with nothing done to the floors. As with those shows, however, all items such as seats, ashtrays, printracks and so on, had gone. Once again these were clean, well-lighted places. All visual detail due to lighting was minimized. In the Auckland City Gallery the spots had been doused, the art space was lit only by fluorescent tubes; the spots at Barry Lett's had been set so as to distribute the light as evenly as possible throughout the gallery space. Since this was not really possible at the Canterbury Society of Arts Print Room, only the centre spots, trained directly onto the floor below, were used. The Wellington subtraction used natural lighting — the curtains were subtracted. Finally, these subtractions effected total subtraction of the volume either of the work, or of the art space. Either one, or the other,

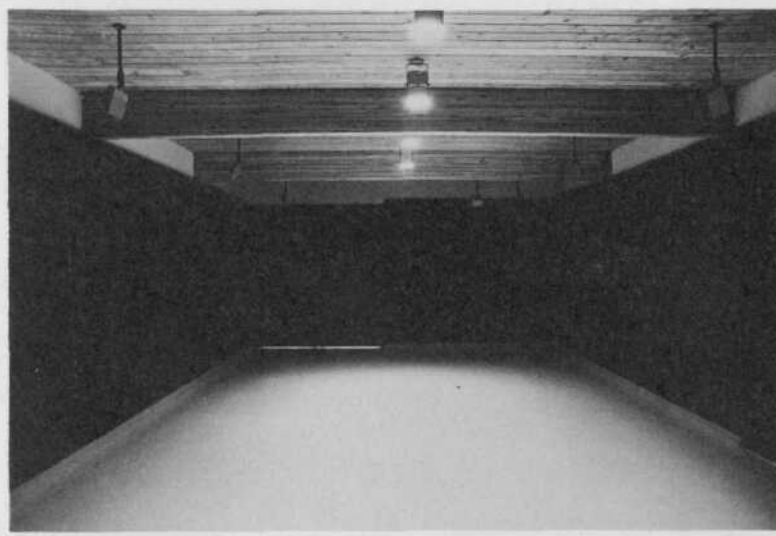


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because in these works there was a virtual identification of work and situation.

It is not true that these works were empty, that the art was really missing from these exhibitions. The point of subtracting volume was to intensify and interpret the encounter between subject (the viewer) and object (the art work). It is one thing to load the terms in favour of the subject, as these three works did more definitively than the others, quite another to defuse the experience of encounter by removing the object. Indeed, the reduction of the object to a function of the situation serves to enhance rather than negate its objectness by endowing it with an impervious *otherness* as apparently apart from the artist as it is from us. The subtraction at the Wellington Settlement Gallery, for example, was certainly accommodating, but it resembled nothing so much as the room of a flat or an office that had just been vacated. No sign there of who it was moved out. Not even a sign of what a Billy Apple, whoever *he* is, might have done with it to make it a more satisfyingly ordered space. Or, of who would move in. It constituted a stage in a process, a show between shows that didn't show. A process that had before and would again compromise the space in the name of some subject. Impersonality is commonplace in contemporary art, here it serves to establish conditions for objectivity in experience.

The artist's attitude to the object can be looked at from another angle. If all art works in some sense interfere with art galleries, Billy Apple's may seem to do so more than most because their interference



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is different from most, untypical. Art galleries are used to accommodating paintings, not subtractions. At the time of writing the City Gallery had not got around to removing 8x8. That their interference does not, or should not, prove intolerable to galleries is not just the result of good management on the part of the artist nor of extraordinary tolerance on the part of institutions. The demands can be met because they presuppose the acceptance of constraints imposed by the "object" — in this case the art space as the artist finds it. He respects the otherness of each of the spaces granted him.

Furthermore, most of these works were conceived after only a brief acquaintance with the space in question. They were, in fact, the improvised products of the artist's encounters with specific art spaces. And doubtless one of the distortions of this account lies in the too neat progression from work to work that it suggests. The West Gallery piece was not an attempt to solve the problem of volumetric subtraction. It was the result of the artist's effort to bring to bear what he knew, what he'd done on a new, an unfamiliar space. The Christchurch and Wellington works, which really are very different, were not attempts to escape the limits that made 28.054 less than satisfactory, but once again attempts to get the measure of new places. Inferences like these about the making of the works are to be carried over into our responses to them.

1. See *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple, 1960-1974*, catalogue for the British Arts Council Exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1974, pp.48-51.

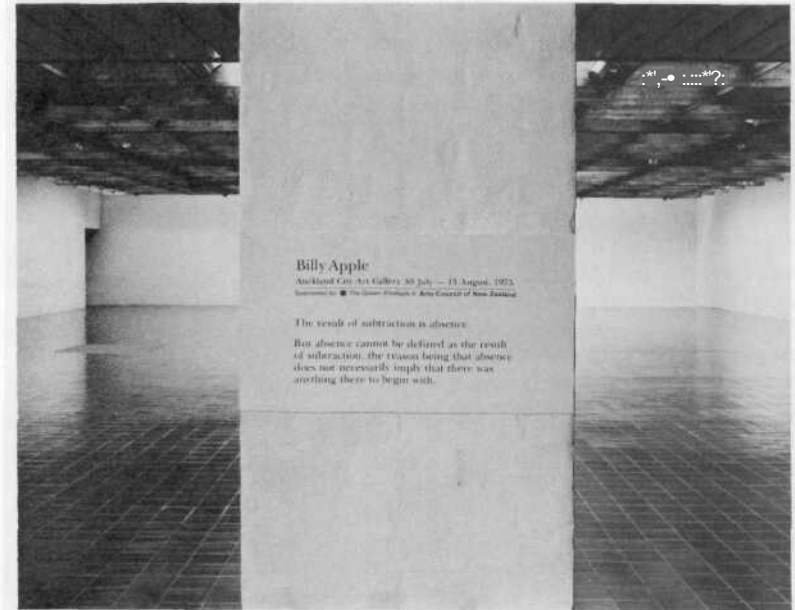
2. Both *Cleaning* and 9 x 9 come after *Floor Scrubbing* (1971) "The floor consisted of 624 white painted tiles. Individual tile size was 8 7/8" x 8 7/8". Area to be cleaned was 16 tiles wide by 39 tiles long (11' 10" x 20' 10"). Actual area cleaned comprised 86 tiles." *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple*, p.43. Also on this page there is a diagram of the floor area in which the cleaned tiles are numbered so as to show the order — unsystematic — of cleaning.
3. Quoted in "This is Conceptual Art", by Rudolf Arnheim, *New York Times*, July 13, 1974.
4. In 1969 Billy Apple opened up his West 23rd Street loft as an art space alternative to dealer and museum spaces for advanced but little known artists. Almost all his own work from then until 1973 was shown there.
5. Statement attached first to the City Gallery Exhibition and subsequently to all the shows under discussion.
6. For a discussion of these and of the works which lead up to them, see Paul Stitelman, "Shifting with Billy Apple", *Arts Magazine* Feb. 1975, pp.76-77.
7. *Floor painting* (1971) could be regarded as a distant relative of this work.

* The artist was assisted by the ACAG Exhibitions Staff.
 ** The artist was assisted by Bruce Dunnett.

* ** The artist was assisted by Ian Berquist.

PLATES

- 1 8x8 close-up of tiles. Auckland City Art Gallery. (Photo: John Daley)
2. 8x8, View from West Gallery. Auckland City Art Gallery.(Photo: John Daley)
3. Untitled West Gallery piece; painted tile area. Auckland City Art Gallery. (Photo: John Daley)
4. View from interconnecting doorway showing both galleries equalized. Auckland City Art Gallery. (Photo: John Daley)
5. *28.054 Cubk Metres*. Four views including two showing alcove covered and uncovered. Barry Lett Gallery. (Photo: Arne Loot)
6. Untitled subtraction. Two views showing opposite ends of the room. Wellington Settlement Gallery. (Photo: Mervyn King)
7. Untitled subtraction. Two views showing opposite ends of room. CSA Gallery, Christchurch. (Photo:)



View from doorway showing both galleries Auckland City Art Gallery. (Photo: John Daley)

NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

WYSTAN CURNOW

Wystan Curnow has been writing for the *Listener* and an essay, "Doing art criticism in New Zealand" appeared in the *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* last year. With Jim Allen he has edited *New Art, Some Recent New Zealand Sculpture*, due for publication this year.

JOHN STACPOOLE

John Stacpoole has at times acted as an art critic for radio and has served two terms as chairman of the Gallery Associates. At present he is a member of both the Art Gallery sub-committee and the purchases advisory panel and is chairman of the Mackelvie Trust. He is also advisory architect to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. He is author and co-author of several books on New Zealand architecture.

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Any member of the public is eligible for membership. Members are invited to previews of exhibitions arranged by the Art Gallery, to lectures, discussions, film evenings, and social functions arranged by the Associates. Regular newsletters are sent out, and Members also receive the Art Gallery's *Quarterly*. Further information can be obtained from the Honorary Secretary, C/o Auckland City Art Gallery.

The *Quarterly* is published by the Auckland City Art Gallery and is concerned with presenting information about works of art acquired by the Gallery. Subscriptions: \$2.00 a year; single copies 50 cents; free to members of the Auckland Gallery Associates. Printed by Wakefield Press Limited, 34 Wakefield Street, Auckland 1.

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