



Report

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

Text by Wystan Curnow on Nine Works by Billy Apple, 1979 - 1980

Billy Apple is, with Colin McCahon and Len Lye, New Zealand's most remarkable living artist. In mid-September of last year he arrived here from New York and embarked on a national tour which brought that home again. He was exhibited, during the first week in December, simultaneously in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. There were eight exhibitions in the space of two months; a ninth opened on February 20, this year. There were three in Auckland. That, in itself, is remarkable.

That is fast art. It was also strong art. Also, it headed him, from the first show, in a new direction. Said simply, the politics suggested or prompted by the work he did here in 1975 became the concern of this tour. The following report figures forth something of the art-political web spun by those nine exhibitions.

Billy Apple designed this cover. He put me in this position. What I have to say about the work is clearly my own business, but he had this idea about where I might start to say it. And it seemed a good idea because some of the shows themselves had included, pinned to the wall, statements I had made about them. The works were intended to give voice to the context in which they took place, so these statements were at once a description (my own) of the context and an instance of the context having its say.

Art New Zealand, come to that, has a visible, a vocal, part to play in the art context. Like a gallery, it too has its big spaces and its small spaces, its front and back pages. And its cover, its most telling of spaces, its shop window. For the art context is, in good part, an art market. So what business have I on the cover then? What am I selling? What is Billy Apple selling, if anything? Are we helping or hindering sales of the magazine by our presence here? All of which is, of course, finally the editor's business: he got Billy Apple to design the cover. And mine is, at the least, to accept that this report, as with any other on Billy Apple's recent work, is somewhat contained by that work.

ALTERATIONS

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, October 16 - 26, 1979.

The artist was assisted by Tony Bates, John Bailey, Ian Bergquist, Robert Ellis and Kal Marsden. Photography by Peter Hannken.

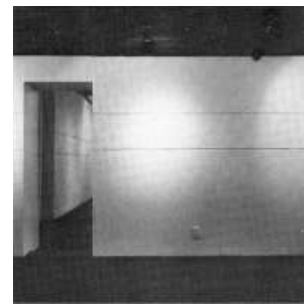
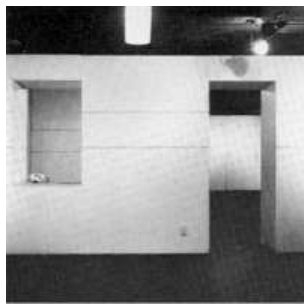
Alter v. ME. (-(O)Fr. *alterer* - L. *alterare*, f. *alter*, other) 1. To make otherwise or different in some respect, without changing the thing itself; to modify. 2. *intr.* To become otherwise, to undergo some change. *3. To affect mentally. *4. *intr.* To administer alternative medicines. *Shorter Oxford Dictionary.*

alter v.t. (Fr, *alterer*; ML. *alterare* f.L. *alter*, other), 1. to change; make different; modify. 2. to resew parts of (a garment) for a better fit. 3. (Dial.), to castrate. v.i. to change; become different; vary. *Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition.*

These premises are closed for/to alterations.
These premises are open for/to alterations.

These exhibition spaces - floors, walls, ceilings, and what they contain - belong to the dealer, the owner of Barry Lett Galleries. They belong to him. These are his premises. He is the dealer. He holds the cards.

The objects made by the artist, or the acts which constitute the work, belong to the artist. They are made, or performed 'on his premises'.

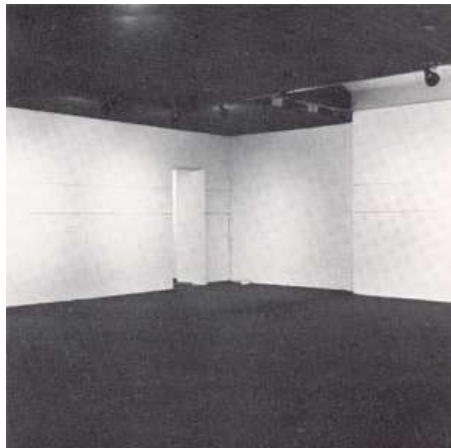
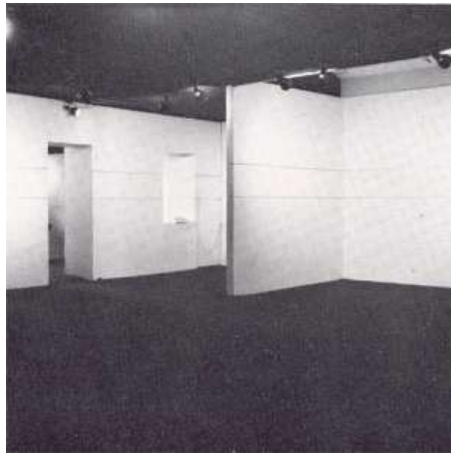


Barry Lett Galleries, Front Entrance Gallery (before and after alterations)

When the content of the work is context, and the context is the exhibition space, to whom does the work belong?

These alterations, which are intended by the artist to be permanent, were not made by the owner. They weren't his idea. The artist considers they constitute a significant change for the better. The owner, on the other hand, is as yet uncertain as to whether any improvement has taken place. He will deal with that question. So will we all. When, if ever, will this exhibition close?

These alterations are among those the artist would make if he had his way. He did not altogether have his way. The place is not his to have his way with. These are the alterations to which the owner agreed. They include one which was announced prior to the 'installation' of the work, and one agreed to during. Discussion may well continue until opening time. As of this writing some uncertainties remain. The artist wants to remove the telephone from the main exhibition space. Is there a telephone in the exhibition?



Barry Lett Galleries, Main Gallery (before and after alterations)

When you enter the main exhibition space you come across a slot in the carpet. It is a remainder/reminder of the partition wall which once was there and which is now gone for good.

That wall was there when Barry Lett Galleries opened for business almost fifteen years ago. Without it, and its accompanying alcove, some works would never have happened. Adrian Hall's *Low Tide* (1971), for one. Billy Apple's own *28.054 cubic metres* (1975), for another. Do you remember them? They, too, are gone for good.

How long have we been coming to Barry Lett Galleries? Add up your openings and I'll add mine. I never saw Jim Allen's *Small Worlds, Five Environmental Structures* (1969). That alcove housed one of those small worlds. In May of this year I saw Greer Twiss's *Support System 1* in there. The site has been removed for

good. The archaeologist is left empty-handed. Let us deal with that.

One thing
done, the
rest follows.

HERE

What
has happened
makes
the world.

Live
on the edge
looking.

Robert Creeley, *The Finger*, 1970.

Every place radically imbues - formally, architecturally, sociologically, politically - with its meaning the object (work/creation) shown there. Art in general refuses to be implied a priori and so pretends to ignore or reject the draconian role imposed by the Museum or Gallery, a role both cultural and architectural.

Daniel Buren, 'Notes on Work', *Studio International*, September-October, 1975.

A work of art, then, is any artifact in the presence of which we play a particular social role, a culturally transmitted combination of patterns of behaviour.

Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos*, 1965.

What keeps it (the White Cube) stable is the lack of alternatives. A rich constellation of projects comments on matters of location, not so much suggesting alternatives as enlisting the gallery space as a unit of esthetic discourse. Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. Yet it is the not ignoble symbol for the preservation of what society finds obscure, unimportant, useless. It has incubated radical ideas that would have abolished it. The gallery space is all we've got and most art needs it. Each side of the white cube has two, four, six sides.

Brian O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube, Part III: Context as Content', *ARTFORUM*, November, 1976.

All methods, then, are subsumed in the attempt to determine the work's intentionality, which can only be done by the critic with the aim of determining his own intentionality through the work. It is its complex, often slowly revealed, intentionality which gives the work its staying power, and the critic can grasp that intentionality only by becoming a participant (participant-creator, even) in the work, which requires that he become conscious of his own intentionality, sees it as well as the work itself as a 'complex'.

Donald Kuspit, 'Art Criticism - Where's the Depth?' *ARTFORUM*, September, 1977.

The above text appeared in the exhibition. I have further to report that the telephone, a bone of contention, remained on the floor of the main exhibition space for the duration of the show. That it figured prominently in a large photograph on the front page of *The Auckland Star* (October 16) accompanied by unacknowledged quotations from my text. That the same photograph appeared in *The Taranaki Herald* for November 3, by which time it had gone. That it was removed October 27, the day after the show closed. That the following week both galleries received a fresh coat of paint. That the slot in the carpet remains, indeed, was put to use by Paul Cullen in the last show of the year as a site for one of his small Building Structures.

That during the opening an open letter to Rodney Kirk Smith from Barry Lett was distributed. It read, in part, as follows:

It is now over five years since I left Barry Lett Galleries and it is almost two years since I approached you with the serious proposal that you change the name of the gallery. . . Since then we have had numerous discussions on this subject and still nothing has been resolved. My opposition to the present situation continues to grow and intensify. . . Your current exhibition. . . offers a propitious moment for me to move from words into action. . . I have decided to remove and destroy the Barry Letts sign. . . which now hangs above the gallery entrance. I hope that this action speaks to you more powerfully than my words have.

That muffled sounds of axe blows were to be heard. The screech of tires of - was it a getaway car? That the police arrived. That Barry Lett was subsequently charged with and convicted of willful damage. And that Rodney Kirk Smith and Barry Lett have since come to an agreement on this matter.

ALTERATIONS

The given as an Art-Political Statement

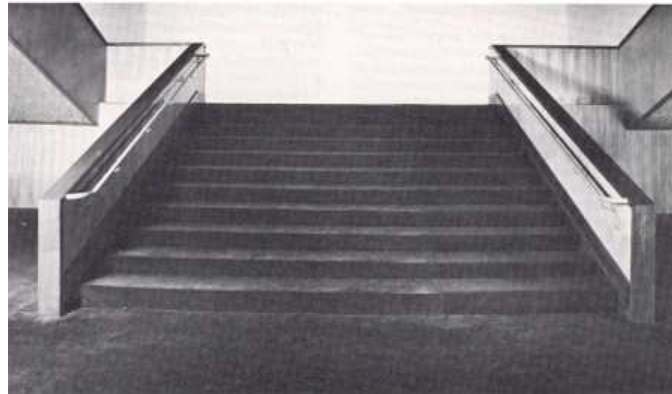
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery New Plymouth February 20 - March 16, 1900.

The artist was assisted by Michael Smither, Peter Scott (painting), Batch Collins, Lester Earl and Bill Guild (removals). Drawing by Ian Pritchard. Photography by John Crawford.

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 behind his commitment, accepted the gift of the work on display and proposed to organise a tour of the artist's British Council exhibition.

Wystan Curnow, 'Billy Apple in New Zealand', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, May, 1976.

Former New Zealand artist Billy Apple is hiding from the Press during his visit to Taranaki this week. . . He took a quick dive into one of the workrooms leaving it to gallery director Mr Dick Bett to explain that Apple is trying to keep his image low key on this visit. The avante [sic] garde artist, is in Taranaki to show slides and do 'something' at the art gallery. Exactly what was kept secret even from the director, until the artist's arrival in the city last night.
Taranaki Herald, November 13, 1979.



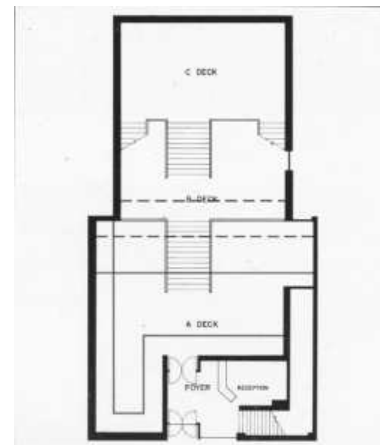
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, staircase between B and C decks (after alterations)

Here there was a shared discovery of the given. The gallery became common ground. Like last time, there was a new director. Dick Bett was given the job, and had taken up the position only weeks before. This was, would become, his gallery; he would make his mark here. The artist was given a show. The opportunity to take part in a thorough-going and critical inspection of the premises with a seasoned user of art spaces had come at the right moment and the director welcomed it. It may be recalled that the design of the gallery was the result of a close collaboration between the architect, Terry Boon, and the first director, John Maynard. Terry Boon joined the tour of inspection.

There were long discussions. A list of alterations was drawn up, plans were drawn up. Meetings took place with officials. Work on the list got under way: one large set of beams, or light troughs, was hauled down, as was part of another. Others were painted white or grey instead of dark brown. Fluorescent panels were serviced and cleaned. Proposed alterations were forwarded to tile Cultural Committee for approval. Air conditioning vents were to be repositioned, but most importantly the staircase between levels B and C was to be extended by approximately half its present width and the balustrades changed. Council approval was given December 17 and an opening date of February 20 fixed.



Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, floor plan showing sightline from Foyer doorway to front edge of staircase (A to B deck), and its projection to B deck. Sightline determines new width of staircase (B to C deck).



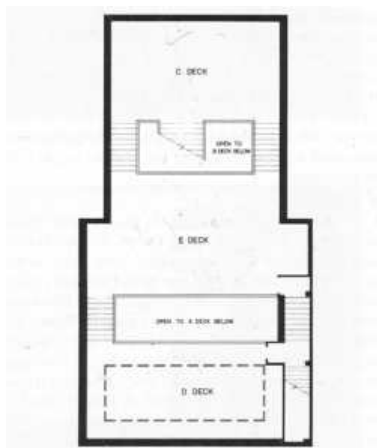
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, floor plan showing light troughs removed (broken red line) and repainted (solid red line).

Further opposition to the acquisition of another Apple art work surfaced yesterday when other city councillors were

contacted and asked for their reaction. . .

'Mr Newmarch said he supported the stand taken by Messrs Honnor and Moss. The modifications should not be designated as a work of art, but as structural alterations, and therefore paid out of maintenance funds. . . Mr Honnor reiterated his opposition.. It was unfortunate the matter had gone this far as it was Mr Bett's first art acquisition as new director.'

The Daily News, November 14, 1979.



Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, floor plan showing light troughs removed (broken red line)

Chairman of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Mr Hamish Keith, Auckland, said today he was impressed by the work Billy Apple had done for galleries on his present tour of New Zealand.

Some committee members had criticised the definition of the proposed work as art; but Mr Keith said the gallery employed a professional director who had the necessary training to define what was art and what wasn't.

Taranaki Herald, November 13, 1979.

CENSURE

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

Peter McLeavey Gallery Wellington November 19 -30, 1979.

The artist was assisted by Kevin Church (painting) and Samuel Stocker (measuring). Photography by Geoffrey Palmer.

1

The artist sees red. The dealer sees red. The viewer sees red. November 19, as a red-letter day. Those eyesores, made to stick but like sore thumbs. Red Cross. No hot-headed redneck. But like a rag to a bull. The Red Flag. Communism. Capitalism. Business, in the red. Suprematism. Ellissitsky, his drawings. Painting the town that colour. Red-handed. Redfaced. Red-light areas. Red Alert.



Peter McLeavey Gallery, larger gallery, showing features censored (red).

2

What is being called the white cube represents a common ground of convention, shared by owners of art spaces, artists and viewers. Criticism of a specific space may, in the event of its becoming a work, render the space more hospitable (as at the Brooke-Gifford) or less hospitable (as here) to subsequent exhibitions. Either way, the irony is that criticism points up the conventional character of the space and so robs it of its innocence, its neutrality. In that sense, the art space is not purified. Rather it is revealed as being subject to, and an object of, negotiation.



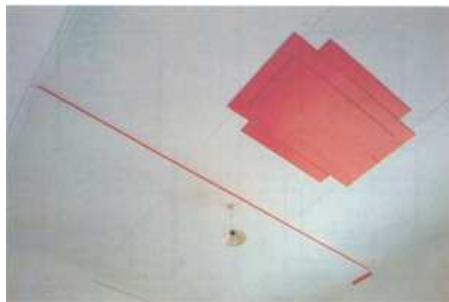
Peter McLeavey Gallery, larger gallery, showing features censured (red).



Peter McLeavey Gallery, larger gallery, showing features censured (red).

3

I go into a gallery ready to pay close visual attention. The paintings there single themselves out for that attention. And they alone repay it. For the rest of the gallery seems plain and self-effacing to me. The painting, this one, has three colours - one is a pale yellow. But the wall is white. The brushmarks are few, the wall has none. The painting's space is shallow, the lighting so intense and even that it flattens out the corners of the room. A single band of red runs down the centre of the canvas, but the wall is uninterrupted by cast-iron grilles, patched up moldings, boltheads, rough plaster jobs. My attention, you see, is on this one painting, my eye alive to it and nothing else. And then - an unexpected noise, maybe - and it's gone. The gallery is empty. When I find my eye it's moving, like a distracted searchlight, over imperfect surfaces picking out castiron grilles, patched up moldings, boltheads, rough plaster jobs, patched-up ceilings. . .



Peter McLeavey Gallery, smaller gallery, showing features censured (red).

4

To begin to comprehend what is involved in this kind of thinking, we may observe, somewhat negatively, that it does not represent, that it does not construct a world of objects. By contrast to representative thinking, it is thinking which allows content to emerge with awareness, thinking which is open to content. Now thinking which constructs a world of objects understands these objects; but meditative thinking begins with an awareness of the field within which these objects are, an awareness of the horizon rather than of the objects of ordinary understanding. Meditative thinking begins with an awareness of this kind, and so begins with content which is given to it, the field of awareness itself.

John M. Anderson, 'Introduction', Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 1966.

THE GIVEN AS AN ART-POLITICAL STATEMENT (Made over)
Brooke-Gifford Gallery Christchurch November 26 - December 7, 1979.

The artist was assisted by John Hurrell, Paul Johns, Nicholas Register and Shaun Rouse. Photography by Glenn Jowitt.

made over, 1. to change; renovate. 2. to transfer the ownership of by or as by signing a legal document. 3. (Colloq.), to be demonstrative toward or about.

Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition

The Print Gallery made over. In three days flat. Grass matting square lifted. Corrugated cardboard that made shift as underfelt - that lifted. Both removed. Bare floor: old varnish there, plus paint (dark brown) round where the matting had not been. Floorboards: some damaged. Some old but matching tongue and groove gotten hold of. Floorboards repaired with care. Whole floor sanded down. Whole floor polyurethaned. Walls and doors got a fresh coat of paint (white). lights: hanging lamps, hemispherical shades - those removed. Replaced with standard fittings flush with the ceiling.



Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Print Gallery, view from front

Hamish Keith, in reviewing ALTERATIONS at Barry Letts, made the point: if you'd not known the place before you'd not have known what, if anything, had taken place here. Nor what to make of the text (adapted from that for ALTERATIONS) pinned there. The gallery-going public as part of the given, then. If you'd known the place before you'd hardly have known it now. What would you make of it? A Christchurch reviewer asked 'whether an artist from New York has the right to impose his values by permanently changing the physical environment in which other, local, artists exhibit?' A question which demonstrates the art-political force of what otherwise was simply an offer, taken up, to do up a small, back gallery over the weekend.



Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Print Gallery, view from rear looking into Main Gallery

When any of these exhibitions close is an open question. One raised on the occasion of the first of them, and, as of this writing, with all of them officially closed, still very much in the air. All the changes to the various art spaces remain. For how long? As if to further preserve their collusion with the artist, the directors of the Brooke-Gifford Gallery agreed to have him curate the first exhibition in the Print Gallery. The two artists who had assisted Billy Apple, John Hurrell and Paul Johns, showed, respectively, works entitled *Dice Scores as Content* and *Barbara/Judith*.

NEW PREMISES

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

Peter Webb Galleries Auckland November 27 - December 7, 1979

Photography by Brian Eastwood.

The installation included two posters showing the space prior to the installation of the gallery and where the walls would go, a set of quotations used at Barry Letts and the Brooke-Gifford, and the following text.

Opening a new space. That, as a given. The art work and the art space as one. That also as a given. The artist and the gallery share these premises?

Discussions concerning an exhibition began on September 17. Between Don Wood, ex-gallery owner (Ikon Gallery), ex-architect, now manager of, partner in, Peter Webb Galleries, and Billy Apple, ex-alternative space owner (161 West 23rd Street, New York), expatriate New Zealand artist (London, New York), now on his second return visit. Discussions turning to the design of the new space. Visits to it. Measurements being taken, sketches made. Talk, almost daily at times. A collaboration. The one talking of fine muslin curtains, the other of large Holland blinds such as some New York galleries have, and later, of walling off windows entirely. The one talking of competing demands of auction and exhibition space, of mezzanine office space, partition heights, of future alterations. The other of the light fittings, the square ones in particular. Of squares and squarings off, of White Cubes. Differences developed. Not all windows walled off. The exhibition space to be divided, a partition running not to the lights but to the ceiling. Conflict. Why not call the whole thing off? Don Wood suggested it once. Billy Apple twice.



Peter Webb Galleries, new premises (before and after), view from Auction Room

But, making a fresh start on new grounds - that was a given. Getting out of the old place in Lorne Street, with its cramped rooms, eccentric doorways, changing levels, water-stained walls into this large, clean, well-lighted space. With room for the rapidly expanding auction business *and* New Zealand's newest gallery for contemporary art?* A gallery for the 80s? Or, getting to New Zealand and doing new works for new spaces. Coming here with proposals and dropping them one by one to make works for these, these particular New Zealand spaces and them alone. Negotiating each on the spot. Both of them: Don Wood, Billy Apple. On the spot.



Peter Webb Galleries, new premises (before and after), views from front and back

On the Spot/An Agreement.

So long as Peter Webb Galleries undertake to complete the following tasks before December 7, 1979, Billy Apple's exhibition will remain on these premises:

1. The metal heaters to be painted and reinstalled.
2. The skirting boards to be repaired and painted.
3. The pillars and sills to be dusted and the carpet vacuum-cleaned.
4. The light switch to be removed from the second pillar, and the socket from the floor.
5. The cut in the carpet (now concealed by a block of wood nailed to the floor) to be properly repaired.
6. The nail to be removed from the first pillar.
7. The light fittings to be cleaned, and new tubes (of uniform colour) to be installed.
8. The red paint spot to be removed from the main dividing wall and the carpet stain removed.

For Peter Webb Galleries:

(signed) Don Wood

For Billy Apple:

(signed) Ian Bergquist

(signed) Wystan Curnow

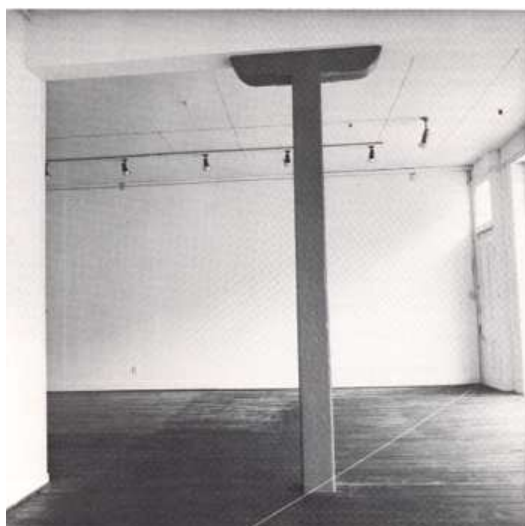
November 27, 1979

THE GIVEN AS AN ART-POLITICAL STATEMENT (Censure)

Bosshard Galleries Dunedin December 1 - 14, 1979.

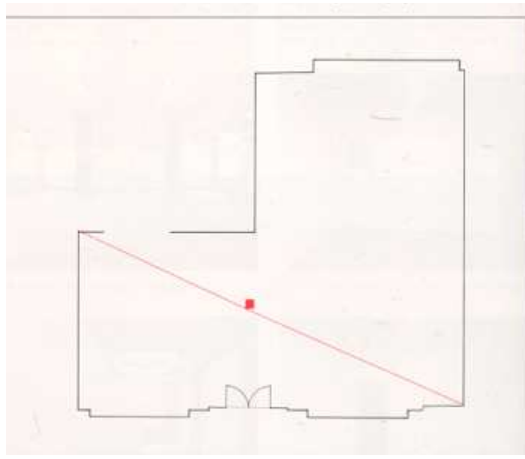
The artist was assisted by Jeffrey Harris, Ralph Hotere (painting), Clive Humphreys and Russell Moses. Photography by the Hocken Library.

The artist had in mind, and on paper, a work called TOWARDS THE CENTRE. The gallery had sent a floor plan with measurements. The space is L-shaped. Two rectangles - either 38'6" x 15' and 18' x 15', or 30' x 18' and 20'6" x 15'. Finding the centres of all four rectangles, he would connect the centres of each set with a length of string. Where the strings crossed was the centre of a rhomboidal figure defined by all four centres. What might be called the centre of the work would not, of course, be the centre of the gallery, hence the title TOWARDS THE CENTRE. They would coincide only if the room was square. So, a work to point up the asymmetry of the given as it gave a concise yet comprehensive reading of it.



Bosshard Galleries, painted pillar (red) and diagonal string sightline

It never happened. TOWARDS THE CENTRE had been based on a floor plan which gave neither the exact dimensions nor placement of the pillar. It turned out the pillar so interfered with the work that it became the critical given. The work which did take place was, then, occasioned by that interference but, as the string makes evident, the pillar presents an obstacle to any careful survey of the space.



Bosshard Galleries, floor plan, showing diagonal displaced

The pillar had been white, camouflaged. The artist flushed it out; painted it red so it declared itself. (And, by choosing that colour, himself also.) Less an obstacle, more the centre of attention. less a part of the structure - the beam appearing to do without its support - and more an object, the pillar singled itself out both for display and for subsequent removal. Colour shook the pillar loose, string lightly held it in place. The string indicated a line of sight. Invited to take up that line, the viewer takes exactly the measure of the gallery

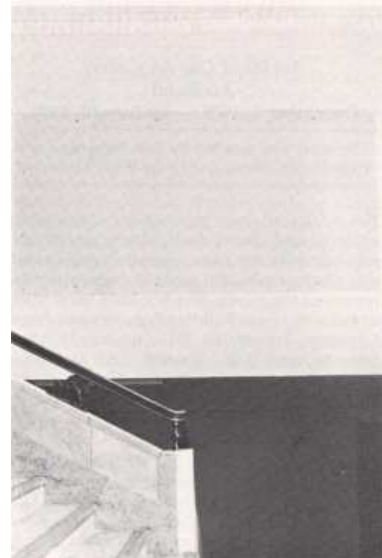
EXPOSE: 17 November, 1979.

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

National Art Gallery Wellington December 3 - 7, 1979.

The artist was assisted by W.j.H. Baillie and Kate Woodgate-Jones. Photography by Geoffrey Palmer.

The two mural-sized canvases in oil by Sir Frank Brangwyn, *The Card Players* and *Venetian Serenaders* (1916) have dominated the entrance foyer to the National Art Gallery's Sculpture Hall since their installation in 1952. Given the National's sad reputation over the years it is hard to say which benefited most from their installation in such a prominent position, the gallery or the undistinguished paintings themselves. In any case, Billy Apple's offer to take them down was happily accepted by the new director, Luit Beiringa. He, after all, had his own new broom in hand. This was, would become, his building. But neither he, nor the artist, knew then that when, if ever, the paintings would re-take their place would become such a firmly open question.



National Art Gallery, Brangwyn installation (*Venetian Serenaders*, 1962 x 3892 mm.), before and after.

As with proposals put to the Auckland City Art Gallery and the Sarjeant, this involved certain risks. Questions of history and public reaction remained hanging, and how telling the gesture would be, how political the art statement depended on the answers to them. In the event the de-installation of the Brangwyns on November 17 revealed that:

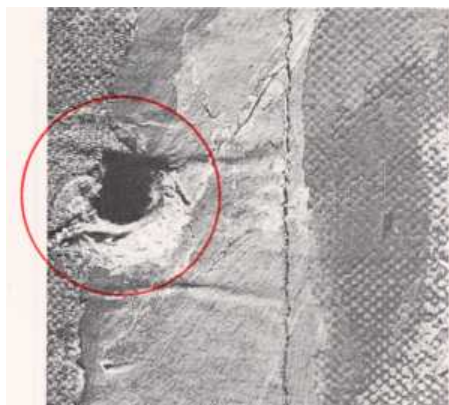
Twelve 90mm metal screws were used to attach the painting to the wall. These were screwed through the painted surface, canvas support and stretcher before entering the wall.

Thirty-nine 25mm and 32mm nails were used to fix four 29mm wide wooden battens to the edges of the painting to conceal the twelve screws. The removal of the battens revealed further damage to the painting around the nail holes.



Steel screw (actual size)

So the installation of the paintings, rather than their removal, became the immediate issue.



Detail (actual size) of *Venetian Serenaders* showing punctured surface of canvas.

It was the subject of a segment on TV 1's *Good Day* programme on December 3. Evidence of the vandalising of the Brangwyns was presented by Jeavons Baillie, Conservation Officer at the National Library. That same day a didactic display opened in the Sculpture Hall. The damaged canvases leant against the wall with chalk marks on the floor in front of them indicating screw and nail holes. On the wall between them was a poster pointing up what had happened.



National Art Gallery, Sculpture Hall, showing installation for EXPOSE.

REVEALED/CONCEALED

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

Auckland City Art Gallery Auckland December 5, 1979 - January 20, 1981

The artist was assisted by Ron Brownson and Tony Green. Photography by Brian Eastwood.

The work contained an installation consisting of tables and chairs, six booklets, and on the wall opposite the now concealed recess various photographs and plans documenting the history of the space. The booklets were titled as follows: File of Building Renovations; News Clippings, January 16, 1952- October 13, 1953; Extracts from C.W. Vennell, *The Mackelvie Trust*; Statement by Wystan Curnow; and News Clippings, current. My statement included what follows (slightly revised) and 'Considerations'.



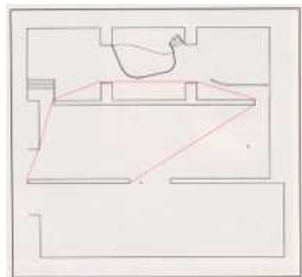
Auckland City Art Gallery, Mezzanine Gallery, before and after

I am going back to May of 1978. Early May, I'd say. And I'm in the office of the then director, Ernest Smith. He's very friendly, welcomed me with an open arm. He's talking - about the exhibitions he wants to do, a big Gauguin show, the art of the funeral director, etc. What I'm here for is to say I'm off to the International Sculpture Conference in Toronto and plan to spend a week in New York on the way - is there anything I can do for the Gallery while I'm there? Well, yes, there is. Would I see how Len Lye's painting is going and talk to him about a show in Auckland sometime? Would I keep an eye out for any reasonably priced contemporary works? The Gallery is definitely interested in a Billy Apple show. October, 1979, say. Get him to send a proposal. There'd be a fee of 500-1000 dollars in it. OK.



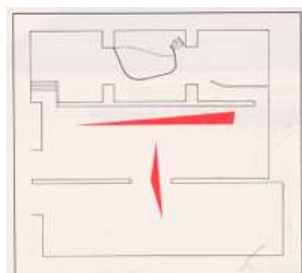
Auckland City Art Gallery, Print Gallery, before

Now forward to the end of May that year. I've got a cold I caught in L.A., but the weather in New York is great today. Up in Billy Apple's Church Street loft I'm looking over large xeroxes of the floor 'plans' of the first floor galleries at the Auckland City Art Gallery. On them various proposals for works. He knows these spaces well; has in the three years since last he worked in them had the plans out, thought about what else might be done in them, for them, to them. In particular, a string piece which ties up more than half the space of the Centre Gallery (below).



Auckland City Art Gallery, proposal for string piece connecting Mezzanine, Centre and West Galleries, 1977.

And a piece which would involve painting the floor of the West and Centre Galleries, two areas (below).



Auckland City Art Gallery, proposal for painting floor connecting centres of pathways between doorways (shown in red), and area connecting centres of galleries and archway (shown in black)

Then we went for a stroll across to the Hudson River waterfront. It was a lovely day. Seeming like a

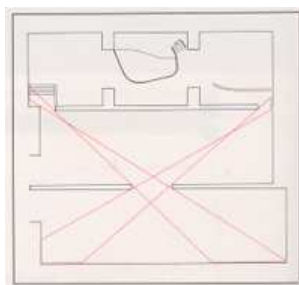
Sunday. Maybe was a Sunday.

Now to July, 1978. On the 28th I wrote to Billy Apple to tell him I'd spoken with Ernest Smith and left him copies of the proposals. Also with Charles MacKenzie, the then curator of New Zealand art. They don't have an exhibitions officer anymore, I told him. They kept. resigning. There was an exhibitions secretary, but she's gone too. Anyway, Ernest was keen, Charles liked the second proposal especially. I sent Billy the following measurements, as requested:

- (1) The drop from the first floor galleries (West and Centre) to the mezzanine (East) is .66m.
- (2) The heights of the exists from the Centre to the East Gallery are 2.48m (south exit) and 2.7475 (north exit); that of the entrance to the West and Centre Galleries from the vestibule is 2.365m and of the archway between 3.4m
- (3) The thickness of the wall between Centre and West is .66m, and of that between Centre and East .73m.

Now this year - 1979. I wrote to Billy Apple on August 2nd. Dear Billy, the Art Gallery is without a Director. Charles MacKenzie is long gone. I have spoken with the latest Curator of New Zealand Art, Alexa Johnston. What Billy Apple exhibition is this? What proposals? There's a new regime. They're madly organized, claiming to have a full calendar of events through 1981. However, the West Gallery has been kept relatively free. But, proposal 1. is obviously out, how about proposal 2. with paintings on the wall? They say they've got no money. No budget, no fee. It's incredible. I'm sorry. Oh, they did eventually find the copies of the proposals I left with Ernest. And Alexa does want a show. All allow there is a (verbal) commitment to be honoured.

Billy Apple sails, by container boat, to Melbourne at the end of August. On the way he works on another proposal:



Auckland City Art Gallery, proposal involving projections of all possible lines of sight from the doorways of the Mezzanine Gallery through to the walls of the West Gallery. Walls at either end of projection to be painted red, floor to ceiling.

Next thing I know the West and Centre Galleries have disappeared. Closed. Out of action for two years! The print collection, among other things, has moved upstairs. The Gallery is on the move. Getting on with Stage I of the move into the old library part of the building. This news on the day of arriving with Billy Apple to discuss his exhibition. Well, says Alexa, the Print Gallery is free - that's the area below the mezzanine. It's an eccentric space, not much Billy can do with that. Can't we just move one of the proposals downstairs? The dimensions are very similar. But, but. Let's look at the plans. The day before Billy had been snooping with Ian Bergquist, (Conservation Department) asking questions. They'd talked about the recessed rectangle in the wall beside the spiral staircase and about the projections in the East Gallery walls. Ian said there were pillars in there, marble pillars. Beautiful orange marble pillars someone said. Let's have a look at the plans. Old rolls came out of drawers, cupboards. The original plans, those for the Edmiston Wing. Where are the plans for the renovations to the East Gallery? Let's have a look at the space again. OK. That's it. How about we expose one set of pillars and fill in the recess? Alexa is enthusiastic by now. She will take the proposal to the Board of Management. But first she must find a budget. She does: 1000 dollars. Next she must get a quote. She does. From the City Council. It's outrageous. I think they don't like the exhibition; that they think art is one thing, Council property another. But that's just what I think. Alexa next gets some more quotes. There's one that'll do. On October 18th, 1979, the new Board of Management of the Art Gallery approves the proposal.

Mr J.M. Stacpoole said the two parts of the exhibition appeared to conflict - one revealed while the other concealed.
N.Z. Herald, October 19, 1979.

Prior to that date the work was without a name. Its title was a gift, from Mr Stacpoole. It, too, part of the given.



Auckland City Art Gallery, Print Gallery, after.

For the artist the art gallery space is a given. For any artist. The gallery wants to give the artist a show, he wants to make something of it. What space does it give him, this show? Which space is it, exactly? What is it? I mean, what does it amount to?

These are questions REVEALED-CONCEALED brings to mind.

Because it makes changes to and shows changes in the gallery space, the work brings particularly to mind the instability of that given over time. History as a given, then. The record of change; itself subject constantly to revelations and concealments.

*The Auckland City Art Gallery's interior splendour might well be worth restoring after a proposed work of art uncovers again its marbled columns, says art history lecturer, Michael Dunn.***

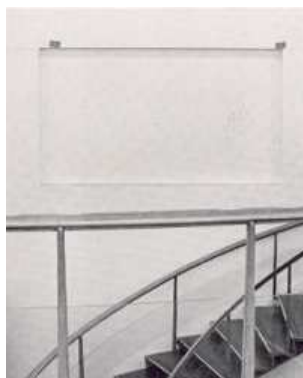
Auckland Star, October 19, 1979.

We thought so, too. And just look at them: *concrete*. Covered in plaster, covered in khaki paint. Fake. World War I shoddy. Woolworths, said one staff member. That'll teach us a lesson.

Alexa Johnstone; [sic] curator of New Zealand painting and sculpture, reported that the recess. .. was originally for a commission from Molly Macalister which the then gallery director Peter Tomory cancelled.

Auckland Star, October 20, 1979.

But the photographs show the recess was there before Tomory. As do plans. I took the trouble to talk to Mr Tibor Donner about this. As City Architect at the time, he had the job of renovating the old galleries in the early fifties. What, I asked, did he have in mind? What purpose would it fulfill, this rectangle, 3.055m x 1.775m, recessed .111m into the wall at the back of the spiral staircase? Well, he said, it could be used for a feature painting or a low relief. No, it'd not been put there with a specific work in mind. Actually, he was a bit peeved nothing had ever been done with it. Our sculptors haven't been making reliefs, I suggested. But he seemed to think a craftsman could've been got to do the job. (Here's problems, I thought, recalling the piece of 'modernistic' wood sculpture outside the Ellen Melville Memorial Hall. Donner designed that building.) Anyway, it'd been a matter of converting a Museum into an Art Gallery, and to Donner's way of thinking the crafts had an important place in an Art Gallery. Which is a point of view. One I'm supposing the then Director, Eric Westbrook, in fact shared. Originally there'd been a corner of the downstairs gallery walled in rattan on which were some perspex shelves on which were some examples of pottery. The corner immediately to your right as you entered. Below the shelves, on the floor, wooden troughs, with pebbles in them, and pot plants. All that's long gone. Since the fifties the crafts haven't figured much in the Gallery. And the pot plants went. The troughs got used for ashtrays and Gil Docking, last Director but three, threw them out. So much for the original homey arts and craft corner.



Auckland City Art Gallery, recessed rectangle, before and after.

As I say, the recess was never used. Deemed unusable it was eventually concealed. Colin McCahon found

a large piece of cheap Indian muslin, dyed it red, and hung it over the recess. It was there for years. When finally it was taken down for a wash it shrunk up so it couldn't be used again. The wall stayed bare after that, except for times when the French tapestry was hung over the hole. Hole it was, 'a visual interruption' in the wall, as one staff member called it. What was it there for? Billy Apple wanted to know. To him it was an affront to the White Cube, that icon of the contemporary art space given which informs all his recent work. It had to go.

Historically speaking the givens of art gallery space are unstable. They are not neutral. A dialectic is in progress between the walls and the work which goes on or between them. The walls 'stand for, speak for a public. Paintings face one audience and hang with their backs to another. Arguments may develop. Wars even. As was the case, apparently, with the disagreements between the Mackelvie Trust and the City Gallery (see extracts from C.W. Vennell's *The Mackelvie Trust* (1971)). Disagreements which were eventually brought to a head over Donner's renovations. Overseas visitors to the City Gallery have often commented on the hanging rails - they've not seen the like. (Barry Lett Galleries subsequently adopted the same system.) As a stream-lined version of the old Victorian rails, they must have seemed a practical and appropriate, not to say cunning, solution at the time Donner thought of them. But then paintings got bigger. And bigger. And there were these distracting lines on the wall behind them. Maybe they were always distracting?

I want to say that Tibor Donner is wrong. An Art Gallery is a Museum. Its collection does date by the day, does leave a hopefully well-preserved and documented trail behind it. Is doing so at this very moment. And its exhibition spaces? For preference it should design and build new spaces every ten years? Because the spaces date too. The former City Architect is plenty peeved about what's been done to his thought out Art Gallery. Forget that cheapjack 1916 Museum, this Art Gallery was designed. He doesn't like the heavy ramp and the stairs so fat and hefty they are - added by his successor to connect it to the later Centre Gallery. They break up the spaces. He doesn't like the Print Gallery, as it is now known, downstairs. Of course it doesn't work; it was meant for pots, pedestals, and small sculptures. And as vestibule to the offices now gone. And my theory about the recess is that it was meant to house - well, whatever, just so long as it drew you up the staircase. The staircase was, and is, the main attraction. Donner's brief from the Director had been that, to make it an attraction. He succeeded. There was nothing like it in New Zealand then. Nothing seemed to support the mezzanine floor, nothing seemed to support the staircase. Actually, people were afraid to go up it. Such a reaction is hard to credit now.

Architecture changes, art spaces change, art changes. Maybe it's the interior splendour of 1953 which should be restored, recess and all. It could become a period room: New Zealand Art, 1950-1965. The entire City Gallery complex is now entering a new round of changes. What are the conditions it has in mind for the art it will give its spaces to?

TOWARDS THE CENTRE

The Given as an Art-Political Statement

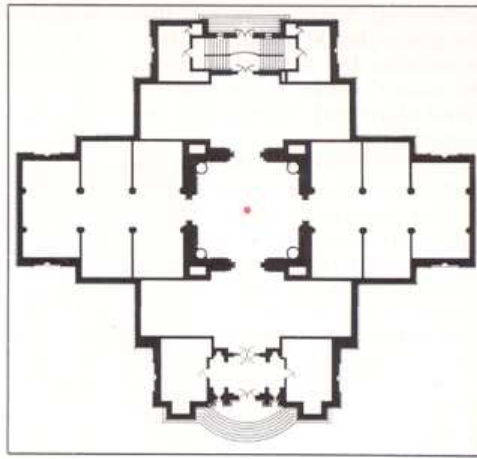
The Sarjeant Art Gallery Wanganui December 20, 1979 - January 27, 1980.

The artist was assisted by Dean Lister and Jan Polson. Photography by Paul Johnson.

The following eight texts were included in the exhibition. Accompanied by a photograph showing the view towards the centre, including *The Wrestlers*, from the wall on which it was hung, each was framed and mounted.

THE REPLACEMENT OF 'THE WRESTLERS' AS THE CENTRE

1. *The Wrestlers* has gone. Most simply described TOWARDS THE CENTRE is the decision to displace *The Wrestlers*. As such, its replacement is not part of the work. It is entirely up to the gallery staff, the Council, the public of Wanganui, to decide whether it will return. If it does return, TOWARDS THE CENTRE will go. There is no middle ground. The Gallery has been put on the spot.
2. *The Wrestlers* is a work of great substance; weighing approximately 1.66 tonnes, TOWARDS THE CENTRE is a work of no concrete substance, but of some consequence. The decision to replace it was not taken lightly.
3. *The Wrestlers* is, in a sense, already a displaced work of art. As a copy of the work of that name in the Tribuna of the Uffizi Palace, it was put here in place of, in lieu of, the original. The real work was never in the Sarjeant Gallery.



Sarjeant Art Gallery, floor plan showing location of *The Wrestlers*.

THE IDEA OF ART AS THE CENTRE

The first thing you have to recognise is that 'Art' is a cultural dialogue, and remains solely that until you take it to the periphery of that dialogue. That dialogue makes a great deal of sense when you take up the boundaries for the idea of a cultural identification and assume art to operate in relation to those boundaries or those ideas or those givens about what art is. . . These are all the context boundaries of what art operates in, and with, and against. Take that and put it right in the middle of a cultural space like a city or a room, a cultural environment, one that has already been bonded, cut up, divided, systematized, ordered, or organized by any system of logic, attitude, aesthetic, or historical precedent. Then, that art is immediately operative in that world.

Robert Irwin, 'On the Periphery of Knowing', *Arts Magazine*, February 1976.

MRS NEAME (PREVIOUSLY SARJEANT) IN EUROPE, AS THE CENTRE

Mrs Sarjeant was an enthusiastic member of the Arts and Crafts Society and after Mr Sarjeant's death and her remarriage to Mr I.A. Neame, a master at the Wanganui Collegiate School, she contributed greatly to the building up of the Gallery collection by purchases overseas. The bust of Henry Sarjeant by Romanelli was presented by her. Sarjeant Gallery Catalogue of Pictures and Works of Art, (1959).

Mrs Neame and I are going to Italy again for the winter and shall take steps to acquire the plaster casts for which the Borough Council gave us instructions. And we shall continue to collect posters of art design and workmanship to make an exhibition worthy of the Sarjeant Gallery.

You will be relieved to hear that we are not in any way taken with the ultra modern schools of Cubism and similar cults.

- from a letter to the Wanganui Borough Council from Mr J. Armstrong Neame, September, 1920.

A POINT IN SPACE AS THE CENTRE I

The sculpture hall is at the centre of the cross formed by the building as a whole. The centre of the floor of the sculpture hall is the centre of the area previously covered by the base of the pedestal on which *The Wrestlers* stood. It corresponds to the centre of the dome over the hall.



Sarjeant Art Gallery, view from front entrance, *The Wrestlers* in place.

The dome consists of glass panels, eight in number. The base of the pedestal had, as you may recall, eight sides. The sculpture hall has eight wall surfaces like the one which you now face.

Each wall surface is equidistant from the centre of the hall. As you read this you will see above the text a photograph of the view towards the centre from where you stand.

How formal a space it is. The given may be seen to be a gift.

THE CULTURAL INHERITANCE OF WANGANUI AS THE CENTRE

1. Wanganui sculptress, Joan Morrell, has objected to this 'meddling with our inheritance'. The Sarjeant Gallery is built in the shape of a Greek cross and has as its centrepiece a piece of fake Greek art. It was built on the grounds of the Rutland Stockade, European bulwark during those wars misnamed Maori.

2. *Centennial Ball. . . Social Highlight of the Week. . . Sarjeant Gallery to be Transformed. . . Several pictures are to be removed and the half-ton statue in the entrance hall will also have to be removed. . . Designed by the Wanganui-Rangitikei Electric Power Board, a lighting scheme of remarkable wonder is to be installed. Special attention is being paid to the floor and there is to be an orchestra of eight pieces. . . .*
The Wanganui Chronicle, March 2, 1940.

LANGUAGE AS CENTRE

cen ter (sen'ter), n. [ME.; OFr. *centre*; L. *centrum*; Gr. *kentron*, sharp point, goad, spur, point around which a circle is described (*kentein*, to prick, goad), 1. a point equally distant from all points on the circumference of a circle or surface of a sphere. 2. the point around which anything revolves; pivot. 3. a place considered as the middle or central point of activity; headquarters. 4. the approximate middle point, place, or part of anything. 5. a thing at the middle point. 6. the ring around the bull's-eye of a target, or a shot that hits this. 7. a point or place that actions, forces, people, etc. go to or come from; focal point: as, Broadway is the theatrical center for the whole country. 8. in biology, a group of cells having a common function. 9. in football, basketball, hockey, etc., a player assigned to the center of a floor, field, or line: the center often puts the ball into play. 10. in mechanics, one of two tapered or conical pins or rods, as on a lathe, for holding a revolving object in position. 11. in military usage, that part of an army situated between the flanks. 12. [often C-], in politics, a position, party, or group between left (radicals and liberals) and right (conservatives and reactionaries): so called from the position of the seats occupied in some European legislatures. Abbreviated ctr. v.i. to be at a center; be centered v.t. 1. to place in, at, near, or toward the center. 2. to draw to one place; gather to a point. 3. to furnish with a center. 4. in football, to pass (the ball) from the line to a player in the backfield. Also spelled **centre**. -SYN. see **middle**.

Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition.



Sarjeant Art Gallery, view from front entrance, *The Wrestlers* removed.

These notes are not in themselves the work, TOWARDS THE CENTRE, although they are certainly about it. They were prepared by Wystan Curnow, with some assistance from Bill Milbank, Billy Apple and Tony Green.

THE TRUTH ABOUT 'THE WRESTLERS' AS THE CENTRE

Described as 'the best-known item', and 'the centre piece' of Wanganui's Sarjeant Gallery, *The Wrestlers* seems unknown for what it is. And no one knows who made it, or when. No one knows when it was bought, by whom and at what price.

Raffaello Romanelli was a little known, not to say obscure, Florentine sculptor and painter approaching seventy when *The Wrestlers* was made 'under his direction'. It was presumably made by one or more of Professor Romanelli's students, as an exercise.

The Sarjeant's *The Wrestlers* is a copy. The original, by an equally anonymous Greek sculptor of the 3rd century B.C. was acquired by Cardinal Ferdinando di Medici and placed in the Tribuna of the Uffizi, where it still stands. It became one of a number of classical repertory pieces to be studied and copied by students of art.

Mrs Neame - the presumed purchaser - must have reckoned it was better than nothing. There were no coffee-table art books in her day.

A POINT IN SPACE AS THE CENTRE

What *The Wrestlers* is is one thing, the position it occupied another. That position was the centre of the Sarjeant Gallery - a centre there is literally no getting away from. You face it on entering, pass it to get to either east or west wings, or the rear gallery. Whatever is there has 'pride of place', and 'exalted position'.

It has pre-eminence over other works, stands for the collection as a whole, for Art itself. And it captures the viewer in its circumstances. All of which may be more weight than any work can. or should bear.

TOWARDS THE CENTRE doesn't take the place of *The Wrestlers*. That place is now empty, that position now open.

CONSIDERATIONS

By exposing the effect of context on art, of the container on the contained, Duchamp recognized an area of art that hadn't yet been invented. This invention of context initiated a series of gestures which 'develop' the idea of a gallery space as a single unit, suitable for manipulation as an esthetic counter. From this moment on, there is a seepage of energy from art to its surroundings. With time, the ratio between the literalization of art and the mythification of the gallery is inverse and increasing.

Brian O'Doherty, 'Inside the White Cube, Part III, Context as Content', ARTFORUM, November, 1976, p.40.

CONSIDER content as always and only a function of context. . . consider context, taken literally, as referring to such physical art spaces as are in question. . . a work facing, backing onto, framed by, enveloped by the critical circumstance of the art space - before any member of the public has set foot in it. . . that circumstance as being distinct, benign, and conventional, and thus weak, and non-specific, as content. . . but, distinctions between art work and art more than ten years ago now. . . at the same time, the benign character of the art space (of the whole support structure even) coming into question. . . conventions to do with how art work and art space relate coming into question and, thus, into the picture. . . the critical circumstance of the art space thus gaining force and specificity as content. . .

CONSIDER the physical givens of the art space as a property of the work. . . in the case of a 'primary structure', the art space describing boundaries of a field activated by the object having force in so far as the object dominates the common ground it shares with the viewer and to which it is addressed. . . as a property only to that extent... or, in the case of an 'installation', or 'environment', properties of the work in fact replacing (temporarily) one or more of the givens - floor, walls, ceiling. . . the terms of the trade-off as a measure of the force of context as content. . . that in either case the appropriation is mutual, physical, temporary, and not of decisive consequence for either, art space and art object being to an extent adaptable to other art objects, other art spaces. . . consider works by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, . . .and; a local instance, Jim Allen's O-AR, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1975. . .

Our poetry now is the realisation that we possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it) and thus need not fear its loss.

John Cage, 'The Juilliard Lecture', *A Year From Monday* (1970), p.106

CONSIDER the physical givens of the art space as property, . . taking possession of the very air they enclose. . . as being drawn on, painted on.. . as if artists' materials, paper, canvas..wall-, floor- drawings or paintings as high" culture graffiti. . . as with some installations, involving more subtle trade-offs. . . as being for display purposes only; not objects for sale, not available for possession by dealer, collector, museum. . . unless the gallery were to shut up shop and be sold off as itself a work. . . not. available for possession by the artist even ..consider the give and take. . . of wall or floor painted on and painted out. . . compared with an object, or structure installed and dismantled. . . the give and take of all concerned - . . consider works by Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt. . . specific instance, Billy Apple's *Censure*, at Peter McLeavey's gallery, 1979. . .

It's a risky business for museums to get into, since there's no telling what artists might do. If it freaks out the trustees, everyone's in trouble. (Imagine, just for fun, Gordon Matta-Clark's sawing the Whitney in half, or Alan Saret knocking a hole through the wall at MOMA. Daniel Buren did get loose at MaMA with some stripes, to be sure, but they were harmless.

Nancy Foote, 'The Apotheosis of the Crummy Space', ARTFORUM, October 1976, p.30.

CONSIDER the physical givens of the art space as social property. . . as having weight as real estate, whatever the social system in question. . . real estate, estate which has priority as thing. . . as belonging to those with other belongings. . . such as political, financial, cultural (at least) status, power... men and women of substance, in other words. " belongings as being objects of desire. . . as palaces. . . works without financial worth, without apparent 'class', which do damage to art space, do associate it with hovels or otherwise bring into question its weight as real estate. . . works which in opposition, or contrast, to the social givens of the art space make content of context... which absent themselves leaving the art space full of itself. . . its doors, windows open to the context at large. . . consider works by Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren. . . and, a local instance, David Mealing's *Jumble Sale*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1975.

Obviously, no one is asking museums to preside over their own physical destruction, Nevertheless, their scant attention to 70s art has certainly contributed to the blandness of their recent bills of fare. P.S.1, by contrast, was uniquely suited to take the 70s in stride. In the 'Rooms' show at least 50 of the 80 artists hacked, gouged, stripped, dug, poured and picked away at its rotting hulk - to their art's content. .. It was as comprehensive a view of mid-70s art as we've had, or are likely to get.

'The Apotheosis of the Crummy Space' p.30.

CONSIDER alternative art space as 'condemned property. . .or, as urban renewal.. .consider it as property abandoned. .. or, property appropriated. . . art as cultural property by definition, art spaces likewise. . . and all art spaces, alternative and established, as locked into the art world: the one seeking the other as context. . . the purchase, of one upon the other... as a matter of a distance defined. .. by inflection even. Nancy Foote's schoolgirl tone: 'Imagine, just for fun', MOMA don't allow... or, consider Auckland, New Zealand, as an alternative art space and New York, USA (P.S.1 included) as an established art space. .. what that distance defines... Auckland City Art Gallery as real estate of no great substance, belonging to people of no great substance. .. having a hole knocked in its wall by Billy Apple. . . or, having a hole in its wall filled. . . gaining an improved wall, an approved, 'white cube' wall. . . the give and take of that. . . and it deciding which to acquire, for the permanent collection... Barry Lett Galleries (Auckland), Brooke-Gifford Galleries (Christchurch) brought up to 'white cube' specifications. . . that in such works the critical circumstance of the art space, its physical givens, may have maximum force and specificity as content. . .

* The auction business did, of course, win the competition for space. In January a deputation of Auckland artists approached the management with complaints about the side-lining (literally that) of contemporary art. As a result of the subsequent negotiations alterations to the new premises should see some addition (small) to the space available for contemporary art.

** Michael Dunn tells me this is an inaccurate account of remarks overheard

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