

Billy Apple's Art For Sale

TONY GREEN



On the poster it said there would be Art For Sale, so that's what you might have expected. But when you got there on April 27th the 'art' was all sold. As you went into Peter Webb's Gallery, there on the end wall on the left was a canvas, about 7 foot by 5 foot, and it said in big red letters right across the top SOLD. At the other end by the entrance there were ten prints in two rows of five each. They all said SOLD too. If you wanted to buy anything it was obvious you were too late. The canvas had been sold to the Future Group, some sort of an investment concern, one would guess, with that name. The prints had been sold to the Australian National Gallery, the National Art Gallery, the MacDougall Art Gallery, the Sarjeant Art Gallery, the Auckland City Art Gallery, and to five different private buyers whose names were not very easy to read.

They had all signed the prints with their names; and the names of the galleries were written on too, in pencil, on a line that had a printed word TO in black. There was a line for the price and a line for the date and a line for the dealer's gallery's name. These things, canvas and prints, were the 'art' for sale, that is these objects.

But they didn't look much like pictures of anything. They were not pictures at all, but sales-tickets, judging by the words on them. The biggest sales-ticket cost \$3,000 and the prints, which after all were smaller and on paper and weren't unique items, cost only \$300. As far as prices went, they were pretty high for New Zealand. The pattern of sales was much like other exhibitions in Auckland, where the big ones are few and go to some big buyer, while the cheap ones are bought up by the private buyers in larger numbers.



All these had in fact been sold at a special preview. I was there. I signed for the National Art Gallery and for the Sarjeant. Billy didn't like it because I put 'the' National etc and 'the' Sarjeant. I thought 'Sold to the National Art Gallery' looked better than 'Sold to National Art Gallery', or sounded better, rather. All the signatories did a ceremonial signing. The prints were done first and then the big canvas. Some people clapped a bit. Someone told Billy he was a star. Everyone was smiling. The artist's parents were there. Wine was there.

The 'art' had *really* been sold before the preview, except for the big one, which was only finally agreed on just before the signing. The condition of the work was that Peter Webb got the works sold in advance, because it is no use having pictures saying 'Sold' if they're not. He had until 5 p.m. on April 26 to get the buyers. He just made it. He'd asked Billy for works to sell, because he wanted to exercise his profession, and because Billy's works were so conceptual there was never any money in them.

This all goes back a bit, to the end of Billy's last trip, when he was working on *Alterations* and similar pieces. That kind of work, and the 1975 pieces, *Subtractions*, were all based on what happened when you tried to empty an art gallery that was used to being full, or filled, with things, with things to admire, or what happened when you tried to get a gallery owner or director to tidy up his premises a bit so the artworks would look like they were presented with care for their appearance, in spaces with a minimum of distraction from hanging rails, telephones, broken woodwork, pillars in the middle, and the like, or

masterpieces hung up by screws through the canvases, things like that that could make a bad impression, that could make you think you were in the provinces, that the professionals were amateurs.

What happened is past history, and everyone knows that the directors and owners didn't appreciate this interference too much, especially so the further south you went, and that quite a few wanted to pretend that this kind of work was only interior decoration, or repairs, that it wasn't anything to do with art. They weren't altogether keen, many of them, to examine their definitions of what art was.

On the whole, they would be definitions, and I do mean de-limitings, frameworks, strait-jackets, perhaps, even, that might have been stretched if they'd been around in the 1920s. But many of them would have been too young. Marcel Duchamp comes, as they say, to mind. Jasper Johns' literalist works of the '50s, Andy Warhol's Business Art and so on, Robert Morris' *Money*, bringing us back to the new Work, *Art For Sale*, which is, of course, more about money than anything else. Gallery spaces, Money.

One piece was odd: the Govett-Brewster staircase alteration piece. What was odd was that Billy sold it to the Gallery as an acquisition for its permanent collection of works of art. The point was, of course, that the only terms in which the artwork was recognisable in New Plymouth was if it was a thing bought for cash, everything else wasn't art. Billy's art was not a staircase, was not even an altered staircase, but a kind of continuing drama around the problem of paying for the alteration of the staircase, a drama that he had set in motion and which he was determined to see through to the end. He had it clear in his mind, so to speak, that an alteration to a staircase, part of the structure of the building, which affects the sense of the artworks displayed in the gallery, could be-designated as an artwork itself, since it provoked such a drama of definition.

Other alterations works were works, and he could therefore be paid for them, just as the painter of a canvas or the maker of a sculpture-object. What was missing from the situation was the notion that an Art Gallery could be a financial sponsor of a work which did not produce a single thing in the way of picture or object. The Given, as Billy would say, was really limited.

Coming to the end of the possibilities of alterations, Barry Lett's, now RKS Art, for a second time . . . he turned his attention to another side of the art-framework, the Money. As I said, Peter Webb was pushing for it. The first thing Billy came up with was the print, edition of 25, *Numbered and Signed*. Literally, numbered and signed was all it was in the big blank space above the lettering, title and inscription. (Billy practices the Billy Apple signature incessantly.) And people paid good money for that. You could say they were getting their money's worth as investments go, in the usual way. The numbering places the work as unique copy in the ordinal series of the otherwise like objects, and the signature guarantees the personal authorial integrity of the print. Those are the two things investors display when it comes to realising their investments.

The question is, does it matter a damn to an investor what the image looks like. Anyone who keeps a picture in a bank-vault is probably not into looking at it too much anyway. In the old days, when art-historians were gentlemanly connoisseurs they certificated pictures for sale, and you can still see auction catalogues that say: To be sold with the certificate of B.B. or whoever. The name is what counts above all. The signature on a Rembrandt is worth the money.

Funnily enough, the advert for the print in *Art New Zealand* no. 17 was placed opposite what looked like an advert ' because it was in the advertising spaces, *From the Gellert Family Collection*. The lettering in black was on a pink ground with a thin red line around it. Squire. Underneath it said: The Given as an Art-Political Statement. Billy Apple. Under that: Sponsored by the Gellert Family Collection. So the page had been purchased to print a work that didn't otherwise exist: taken, it appears from the private collection and available to all buyers of the magazine for no extra cost. The work says that it is a space transferred from advertising to art thanks to the Gellert Family, and says nothing more. The collection becomes sponsor of a work, in which the negotiation and the implications are the point, not the image (as a picture is an image). That is the peculiar advantage of making a literal statement in a space.



SOLD follows the same principle. The statement refers to nothing but the context, that is to the givens of the situation which come to bear upon the making of the statement in the space. There is no other content. Curiously, *SOLD* does produce an image, but not a painted picture of anything. I can see as clear as anything scenes with negotiations going on, dealer, buyers, artist.

There was also a *Sold* advert in *Art New Zealand* no. 18, a *Folk Art/For Sale* in *Artforum*, November, 1980, on the same lines. The *Sold* had a blank space with a hand-mounted red sticker in the middle. Underneath, the word *SOLD*. The sponsors were three dealer galleries, Denis Cohn, Barry Lett and Peter Webb. But these pieces are variations on the same theme. There had even been a canvas, now destroyed, lettered *FOR SALE*, by Billy, in 1962. Another literal work, reflecting on the money side of art.

He'd planned a subtraction, August 15, 1975, while working on a piece at the Barrington Gallery: an ad space in the *New Zealand Herald* with the measurements and the words: A Subtraction. Obviously, nothing for sale, except the space which would have had to have been bought. The ad and the literal inscription are Billy's favourite weapon. It's as if the person that Billy Apple is is always looking at the way the money goes around in circles and what makes it go.

Billy Apple is, of course, himself a work of art, a name, invented in London. He began his career with literally casting apples in bronze, sculptures. In 1968, the same Billy Apple was advertising Lowry Organs on TV. He wanted to do it just with a soundtrack, but TV company rules said there had to be some image. He ran *ADVERTISEMENT* on the otherwise blank screen (see top of left hand page).

SOLD turned investors on. It turned investors into sponsors of a conceptual work, though they may not have noticed this. What they did was put up the money for a complex set of negotiations between dealer and clients, and artist and dealer over the details, and artist and his friends in endless discussion of refinements of the piece, in which -the limits of art, the place of money in it, and the value, ultimately, of the art, were all open to question. At every stage this was a New Zealand work, in so far as it was responsive to specifically New Zealand views of the value of art and what should constitute the content of art. It had to be objects, it had to be for sale, or appear to be. It needn't have an image in the sense of 'abstract' or 'figural', it could be an inscription. It had to have investment potential.

Now comes the question *where is the art?* It can't be the canvas can it? The art surely is the transaction(s). *What is the value of it?* Clearly, money-value is uncertain. Someone might want to re-purchase *SOLD* some day for more than \$3,000. Surely the value is in the process of monetary transaction revealed, shown naked, that is happening here, that is made possible by the set-up and the follow through of the artist, working with the givens of the situation.

Is it a joke? Only from the point of view of someone who doesn't know that art is not identical with pretty pictures. From that point of view the clients look silly. From the point of view of what was made possible in the way of opening up the problems of transactions in art, the clients were generous with money, and generous to take the risk of sticking their necks out in a climate of public knowledge and opinion in which they might get their heads chopped. The scale of the money-operation, especially the big canvas at a high New Zealand price, draws into the work, with few exceptions, those who are engaged with the arts, for everyone's pleasure.

Correction

The sequence of illustrations to the above article implied an incorrect chronology. The correct order is as follows.

1. *Numbered and Signed*. A screenprint from the W. M. and K. S. Brown collection, reproduced as an advertisement, *Art New Zealand* 17, 1980, page 4.

2. *From the Gellert Family Collection*. *Art New Zealand* 17, 1980, page 5.

3. *For Sale Folk Art*. *Artforum*, November, 1980, page 110.

4. *Sold* (red sticker). *Art New Zealand*, Summer, 1981, page 5

5. *Art for Sale*.*

6. *Sold (For...)*. A canvas (Future Group) and ten works on paper (Australian National Gallery; National Art Gallery; Auckland City Art Gallery; Robert McDougall Art Gallery; Sarjeant Gallery; W. M. and K. S. Brown Collection; J. M. W. Coutts; Jonathon Gooderham; Julian Miles; Anthony Petrie.).

**Art For Sale* was never published. It is not a work. It was one of two proposals made to the galleries mentioned; the other, *Sold* (red sticker), was the one agreed to. There was, however, an announcement for the exhibition at Peter Webb Galleries of works referred to in (6) which read 'Art For Sale'.

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