

# Where Apples Come From

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Mark Amery takes stock of the ongoing vitality of Billy Apple's art at Auckland Art Gallery.



By Mark Amery

When Billy Apple visits Auckland Art Gallery during his retrospective of 55 years of art-making the bollards come down. A parking space is provided for his black branded Mini Cooper front and centre on the Kitchener Street forecourt. Black banners bearing his logo hang from streetlights down the street. When I visit, Apple is busy making some fine adjustments to a badge on one of his racing cars and bikes, garaged in the gallery's airy atrium. Welcome to Billy's manor.

Across from his premium parking space, on the wall of the forecourt is a text work the conceptual artist first created in 1985, and has been appearing up large in public space ever since: *The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else*.

If everybody lived like Billy Apple – exerting his or her brand up large, negotiating privileged treatment – we'd be in trouble. And, in fact, we are in trouble. There's the rub – the thing that makes Apple's practice, considered over a five-decade spread, so vital. In testing out the artist as a brand he has mirrored our cult of the individual, and the privileging of the corporate individual. Not to mention the rights afforded to the private motorcar.

Whether you're insulted or full of admiration, Apple's works often forcefully underline the influence today of private power over public space. You may, like me find the consistent appearance of the Billy Apple logo on black on the back of Auckland buses currently a little dark and sinister (this passion for the 'national black' and cars shades perhaps of our recent empty dalliance with Kim Dotcom). And you may wish to consider what buying the newly released Billy Apple cider says about your consumer decisions: I can tell you from the web that it blends four different apple brands according to Apple's beloved Golden Ratio; and also, that it was developed with Saatchi and Saatchi worldwide director Derek Lockwood. I can't tell you where the apples come from.

There isn't an artist who has better matched the cultural-political shifts in our visual culture than Billy Apple. As curator of the retrospective Tina Barton smartly notes in introducing the exhibition, Apple's timeliness is how he "tests how art and the artist can perform under the influence of consumer capitalism in an era of ever-advancing technologies"

That word 'perform' is well chosen. Rather than explicitly critiquing the era, Billy Apple as person and brand (trademarked in 2007) embraces it as a collaborator. His work is a comfortable corporate bedfellow, but that in turn reveals much in making us uncomfortable. You don't have to like him to appreciate what he reveals about the art market.

Take the provision for free at Auckland Art Gallery of posters reading 'Billy Apple Art as Free for the Taking'. They're not available in the foyer. Instead they sit as a pile amongst works recording transactions between Apple and the wealthy. The now stock contemporary art action of providing a free poster work in Apple's show feels like a loaded insult.

In terms of providing a laboratory for an artist exploring how they might extend their brand into the world with maximum impact, New Zealand as a small country has its advantages. This is something Apple's return from New York in the 1980s realised. Negotiation is Apple's art, and Apple's return also coincided nicely with increasing market deregulation.

That said, the unrealised ideas in this exhibition - from the attempt to have a motor racetrack art event around Lorne and Kitchener Streets to a highrise Apple Tower in Wellington - are just as of interest as those realised. The work is as much the process rather than the result. Even in failure Apple juices maximum visual impact through gallery negotiation. Lest we forget it wasn't allowed, his art circuit racetrack idea is printed up large as text wall work in the atrium above his vehicles, looking out over its envisaged site.

From his forecourt carparking space, right down to insisting on dictating the order of proceedings for the Auckland Art gallery opening Apple's interventions can still pack a strong art-political punch. May they inspire other artists to bargain alongside corporate sponsors for the best representation.

Apple isn't shy of also maximising his brand presence in other ways. At the same time as the retrospective we have an exhibition of Apple soundworks at Te Uru in Tiritangi, works from the Mamaku Trust from his 'Fundraising' and 'Art as Transaction' series exhibited at Whangarei Art Museum, and recently a strong Artspace installation of a series of 1960s works, SUCK.

Yet for all the works and exhibitions circling, the actual retrospective within the AAG galleries is remarkably straight. It boxes Apple's work into clear thematic areas, largely following a chronology. It has the feeling of an artist getting their affairs in order. It reflects in spirit the clear-cut well-spaced design which the Apple brand is famous for.

The groupings around theme do work well. 'The Given as an Art-Political Statement', Apple's ongoing series of interventions into the architectural design of gallery spaces, is strongly placed lining an independent corridor, effectively cutting through the AAG. 'From the Collection' presents a private room of Apple's works where the buyer or benefactor's name is stated and the design of the work has been realised in collaboration with them. As a whole it's testament to Apple's constant inventiveness, and stresses beautifully the relationship between art and private prestige.

Apple is less the creator of enduring major works than one of many actions which together reward consideration. Individual works are often nifty experiments in extending the idea of the artist as subject (whether its a brainscan back in the early 1970s or the recent deposit of his blood cells in a cell bank), or clever design ideas that play off the value of the exchange.

Yet in laying out more than 150 artworks in this retrospective there's also a bit of a surfeit of average work that does the conceptual linkages between Apple's earlier and later works no favours. I find Apple's 'gallery abstracts', treating gallery floor-plans as abstract works, underwhelming alongside the records of actual extensions and subtractions he has made to galleries over the years. His neon works of the late 1960s, whilst demonstrating Apple's engagement with process and new technology, feel like an experimental blip where he wavered in his exploration of the artist as subject. I tire of the experiments with the golden ratio.

The retrospective tidies up Apple's oeuvre. Better representing his impressive, scattered restless energy is Barton's accompanying published introduction to his work *Billy Apple – A Life in Parts*. Working year by year we see his push in multiple directions, in ways that are often more about extending the reach and edges of art than the artist as brand. Recent distinctive work like 'The Bruce and Denny Show', his current work with a marine geologist to find the centre of the extended continental shelf of New Zealand (yes, really), and the permanent public art project the Wairepo Swamp Walk in Sandringham are curious for being tidied away out of the exhibition itself. Instead, from the conception of Billy Apple in 1962 with a name change and Lady Clairol Istant Creme Whip to his immortalisation through the gift of his cells, a well-crafted narrative for Apple is asserted.

There's a constant tension between Billy Apple the person and brand Billy Apple, and this is key to his works' strengths, and its weaknesses. Apple the artist (of course) isn't as tidy as his design work. A room of Apple's works for charity (his 'Good Works') can be viewed as corporate giving, but at the same time reveal the personal caring concerns of the individual behind the brand. On the other hand, Apple the individual has long loved motor racing, and the cars and bikes (each with their own painting) feel like the weakest works in the show. I guess I just don't share Apple's fascination.

For all the tidying, the edges where Apple, his art and the rest of the world meet continue to be a charged space.

- The Artist has To Live Like Everybody Else, Billy Apple, [Auckland Art Gallery \(http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/whats-on/events/2015/march/billy-apple-the-artist-has-to-live-like-everybody-else\)](http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/whats-on/events/2015/march/billy-apple-the-artist-has-to-live-like-everybody-else), until June 21
- Billy Apple: [Soundworks 1968 – 2015 \(http://www.teuru.org.nz/index.cfm/whats-on/calendar/billy-apple-sound-works-1968-2015/\)](http://www.teuru.org.nz/index.cfm/whats-on/calendar/billy-apple-sound-works-1968-2015/), until June 10
- From the Matuku Trust Collection: Works by Billy Apple, [Whangarei Art Museum \(http://www.whangareiartmuseum.co.nz/content/matuku-trust-collection-works-billy-apple\)](http://www.whangareiartmuseum.co.nz/content/matuku-trust-collection-works-billy-apple), until June 26

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