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Billy Apple Review

*Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else*

Exh. cat. Auckland, NZ: Auckland Art Gallery, 2015.

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*Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else*. Installation view. Courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Featuring work from 1960 through the present, *Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else* was one of the most significant survey exhibitions ever accorded a living New Zealand artist. Staged in the country's largest public art museum, it gave institutional and public recognition to an extraordinarily complex and comprehensive individual practice, and demonstrated the importance of a Pop-Conceptualism nexus to the recent history of New Zealand art.

The title of the exhibition and the accompanying handbook—*Billy Apple®: A Life in Parts*—pointed to the centrality of biography as a key lens through which to approach Apple's practice. This "life in parts" narrative arcs from the moment a young man named Barrie Bates from Auckland, New Zealand, arrived in London in 1959 to enroll in the graduate diploma course in graphic design at the Royal College of Art and up to the present working life of the eighty-year-old artist Billy Apple, now long back in Auckland. He works with—and effectively as—a registered trademark, extending his brand to a range of consumer products; undertaking an ongoing series of public projects and propositions; using the transactional value of much of his art to support social justice and humanitarian causes; participating in research and exhibitions that revisit and reposition elements of his own history as an artist; and collaborating with scientists on *The Immortalisation of Billy Apple®* project whereby cell tissue from the artist's body has been virally transformed to enable it to live outside the body. Along the way, this arc takes in early moments in Pop art on both sides of the Atlantic, testing the intersections of art and commodity, and absorbing lessons learned from the imperatives of advertising around the clarity of communication, visual messaging of a

concept, and creation of brand awareness and identification. It travels through experiments in art and technology; focuses for an extended period on process-based actions, site-specificity, and the stratifications of power and value in the art world; and then shifts the emphasis to the almost mysterious means by which value is ascribed and manifested in material and aesthetic forms.

“Billy Apple” came into being on November 22, 1962, in East London, when Barrie Bates took on an identity that accorded him a freedom to “start over” unencumbered by history. Critically, it also demonstrated a merging of art and life identities under a moniker that functioned as a new concept—part art object, part brand—that would in turn come to drive a practice bracketing aesthetic and communicative strategies of both art and advertising. By this time the artist had already demonstrated a canny advertising-derived impulse toward using technical outsourcing to produce coolly impersonal but highly stylish images and forms that focused critical attention on the concept “frame” of art. His work for the *Young Contemporaries* group exhibition of early 1962 at the Royal College of Art is a key example. He produced the poster promoting the exhibition by enlarging an official label used to identify artworks in the exhibition, and then transferred it to canvas as an artwork submitted to the very same exhibition—part Pop appropriation, part conceptualist drive at the way in which meaning and value is nominally ascribed by and as “art.” As Billy Apple later the same year, he produced a series of portrait lithographs of his head, photographed from the front and back by the photographer Robert Freeman. They were exhibited in the 1963 solo exhibition *Apple Sees Red: Live Stills* at Gallery One in London, along with other serial objects collectively highlighting “Apple” as standing for an artist, object, brand, and concept frame.

The early section of *Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else* was the most elegantly presented, befitting work that is formally polished and conceptually sharp in its elusive play with the burgeoning commodity fetish that was both the character and subject of Pop art at the time. While it is of course easy enough to read the logic, or happenstance, of a career trajectory retrospectively, the character of Apple’s early work makes his relocation in 1964 to New York—to Madison Avenue and the world of Pop—appear inevitable. Yet soon after his arrival, Apple’s work took a new direction. After exhibiting in the now famed *American Supermarket* exhibition at Bianchini Gallery in 1964, Apple began exploring new media associated with corporate culture. His work with technologies such as neon and laser light includes pieces that place the Apple brand front and center, such as *Neon Signature (Red)* (1967), but also includes some extraordinary sculptural objects that emanate from and refer directly to the gaseous, almost living chemical and electrical energy of their own composition. A selection of these works, which Apple collectively refers to as *Unidentified Fluorescent Objects*, along with the 16mm film *Gaseous Discharge Phenomena* (1968)—a study of the fizzing, pulsing intensity of neon—made up the most astounding room of the exhibition.

This room was only the second of some dozen or more that made up the exhibition, not to

mention the atrium level display of Apple's collection of vintage racing vehicles and their associated canvases, or the designated parking zone at the gallery entrance for the artist's Mini Cooper, the sight of which indicated that he was in the building. The challenge posed by the scope of Apple's practice—his prolific output, the shifts and recalibrations that consistently reenergized the work, his insistent designations of actions and accumulations of the traces and products of life as art, the massive scale of his archive, and his own apparently tireless engagement with its recasting into the present—were well met by the institution and curator Christina Barton.

Apple shifted register again around the late 1960s, setting aside the allure of technology, commodity forms, and the market, and beginning a series of modest “subtractive actions”—polishing a section of a floor, cleaning a window, removing dirt from a given space—all of which were simply but carefully documented. These actions extended to the subtraction of his own bodily excretions, grouped under the title *Body Activities* (1971), which was the subject of a censorship controversy at Apple's *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple* 1974 solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London. Keeping with the rigor of his approach to subtractive activity, Apple also carefully documented the removal of the work from the exhibition, considering this act as itself another process-based work. During the first half of the 1970s, this process-focused practice centered on the artist's own space, “APPLE,” which he ran on West 23rd Street, but also included a series of propositions for other commercial and institutional spaces, such as provocations to undertake certain key architectural or spatial subtractions like removing a wall, furniture, paint, etc. These subtractions pointed to the operative norms of power within such spaces. At this point, and through such work, Apple truly entered the story of New Zealand art.

In 1975, Apple returned to New Zealand for the first time in seventeen years, undertaking a tour of six major public galleries, including the Auckland Art Gallery, with instructional works based on examinations of the given conditions of their physical forms. He requested subtractions and alterations to the spaces to draw attention to the assumed function and meaning of these sites. Although Apple returned to a local context in which post-object, instructional, and process-orientated art had developed a strong footing since the late 1960s, in particular in Auckland with the programming of the Auckland Art Gallery, this work was provocative and challenged the nascent art curatorial and managerial sphere to be attentive to its own sites and conventions of practice. The importance of this work—as well as that of Apple's subsequent set of alteration works in nine public galleries in New Zealand from 1979 to 1980 called *The Given as an Art-Political Statement*—to the history of institutional critique and socially engaged practice in New Zealand cannot be understated.

Both the artworks and the exhibition shifted register again at this point; a certain formal restraint and conceptual refinement in the exhibition presentation gave way to a dense, clustered hang more in keeping with the bravado and ebullience of Apple's work from the early 1980s onwards. Although Apple resided in New York during the 1980s, his presence in

the New Zealand art scene skyrocketed with his work drawing on his earlier interests with the concepts of communication, ascriptions of value, and the market. Apple returned to making art objects—beautiful, formally resolved, desirable objects—but objects drawing on the aesthetic forms of advertising and its use of production teams, from the copywriter to typographer. His “paintings” and prints were the highest quality of signs, with careful attention to scale, color, and typeface—the factors that impact both their desirability and persuasive, communicative power. Having picked away at the value systems of the art institution, in these works, loosely grouped under the ongoing framework of *Art Transactions*, Apple turned his attention to the ascendant value system of the 1980s, which was based in financial transactions surrounding ownership and private property. In these and related works, art exists as both a form and record of transactional exchange in canvases that are part sign writing, part receipt of transaction. In short, art is its own value, whether recorded as a record of sale in the *Sold* series (1981), *Exchanged* (1985), *Auctioned* (1985), *Commissioned* (1987), or *Bartered* (1989/91). In *Paid*, begun in 1987, the phrase “The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else” appears in signed acknowledgments of the given owner’s payment of a bill to the artist, so it conflates the transactional value of the art exchange with the real-world expenses of the artist.

Apple’s concentration on value led him to work with gold—the demonstrative sign of desire, buttress of value, and repository of wealth—and by extension the golden ratio as an ideal system of value apportionment. Later in the 1980s, he supplemented the *Art Transactions* works with another ongoing series, *From the Collection*, commissioned paintings simply stating “From the [insert name here] Collection.” Apple determined the typography and composition; the purchasers chose the colors and scale. These bodies of work first produced in the boom and bust years of financial deregulation, privatization, and speculation appear now as trophies from, memorials to, or conscientious reminders of an era of unabashed reveling in the rewards of the marketplace.

Of course, the ascendancy of the market has hardly waned in subsequent decades, but its machinations are perhaps more subtle, the avarice less self-declamatory. Consequently, Apple’s path back to a brand as traced in the exhibition followed interweaving paths: a small business-like accumulation of trademarks and product lines crossed with an exploration of the potential of a brand to intervene in public life beyond the market, from public-space projects to charity support, while being attentive to the broader political and economic relationships that can either enable or impede such work, with both actions often in close proximity to each other.

Interestingly, the exhibition did not dwell on matters of legacy, even while focusing on a practice that in recent decades has cast itself back into its own past as well as forward, exploring its own place—or places—in the histories of Pop art, Conceptual art, and process-based art while remaining generatively influential. That the example of Apple working full time as a conceptual/post-conceptual artist with an international career both from and

within New Zealand now seems unremarkable is in some small part due to his own forceful influence within the culture to which he eventually decided to return. The substance, volume, and critical acuity of the Apple project presented in *Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody Else* secures his status as a major artist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, one whose work has shifted the framework of possibility for artists around him and the understanding of what forms art might actively adopt within the changing cultural situations in which artists find themselves.

Crucially, as *Billy Apple®: The Artist Has to Live Like Everybody* revealed above all, there is still a nimble quality to Apple's ongoing work, even in relation to its reexamination of its own histories. Successful brands are in a constant state of reinvention: carving space in the present, claiming their own histories, anticipating their futures, and appealing to wide constituencies while intimately communicating to the individual. They are, and must always be, relevant to their moment. Apple is just that.

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