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BILLY APPLE, *Res Dominus Clamat: A Forced Relation of Two Destined-to-Be-Unrelated Things*, 6 March 1973, 1973, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Photo by Robert Cross. Courtesy Adam Art Gallery, Wellington.

BILLY APPLE

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Barrie Bates renamed himself Billy Apple in 1962, a forceful rebranding that linked his sensibility to the nascent Conceptual and Pop Art movements in equal measure. Apple has worked in New York, London and Auckland in the years since then, undergoing several more remarkable changes in his creative persona. He is now one of New Zealand's best-known contemporary artists, yet the mutability of his continually challenging methodology may explain why he is not yet entirely understood.

"New York 1969–1973" momentarily pinned down the man by narrowing its focus to the period when Apple, together with his then-wife—also an artist—Jacki (along with numerous colleagues, including Fluxus artist Geoff Hendricks) operated the appropriately named Apple, one of the earliest artist-run spaces in the burgeoning Manhattan alternative scene. Many photographic images, taken in straightforward documentary style, depict the artist carrying out cleaning chores both outside and inside the gallery: wiping, sweeping, vacuuming and scrubbing.

Apple (as an exhibition venture) placed those actions, which normally play a behind-the-scenes role, front and center. In this way, the gallery functioned as a site for emerging works that could all the while demonstrate a distinct and prescient inclination toward institutional critique, soon to be a hallmark of much vanguard art. To clean is to offer up a fresh start and to identify oneself as a worker; both meanings were in sync with the motivations for running an alternative art gallery at the time.

Body Activities June 1970–June 1973 features such initially off-putting artifacts as soiled tissues evidencing bodily waste, but Apple's working approach is far more procedural than scatological. As curator Tina Barton has noted, the artist's treatment of everyday actions as "art activity . . . had the effect of shifting attention to process and to the specificities of context, and saw a wealth of non-art materials utilized in fluid and contingent arrangements." These works recall Duchamp's notes on the "inframince" ("infraslilm"), wherein the artist imagined a "transformer designed to utilize the slight, wasted energies such as . . . ordinary spitting and of blood/vomiting/ejaculation."

The artist interrogates both his own pliable identity as an artist and the idea of creating site-responsive works in the urban context by videotaping his visit to a fortune teller in *Card Reading 30 January 1972*. The charming installation *A Forced Relation of Two Destined-to-Be-Unrelated Things* (1973), in which a found piece of brown bottle glass inside a lid from a jar of mayonnaise is accompanied by a lengthy text describing the process that brought the objects together, shows the artist looking for a way to capture and record elusive incidents.

One of the most captivating facets of this show was the chance to encounter again and rediscover 40-year-old works now reinstalled, a process that involved many discussions between the curator and the artist. *Neon Transformations: An Inventory* (1972/2009), presents pieces of neon tubing originally used in Apple's New York period (and seen in displayed footage from the time). He declared the installation complete after it had been carefully arranged and sorted by the Adam Art Gallery staff. The excavated piece became transformed, its colorful iridescent bits rejecting any immediate closure or facile summary.

Wellington viewers were further reminded that the 74-year-old Apple is alive and well, as the show's opening coincided with the artist's contribution to the nationwide "One Day Sculpture" project. For *Less Is Moore* (2009), Apple proposed (unsuccessfully) to "clean"—that is, to remove a protective coating from—Henry Moore's *Bronze Form* (1985–86), located in the nearby Botanical Garden. Apple continues to locate his critical strategy via seemingly slight actions in order to summon an evocative array of cultural and historical questions.

Tools

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