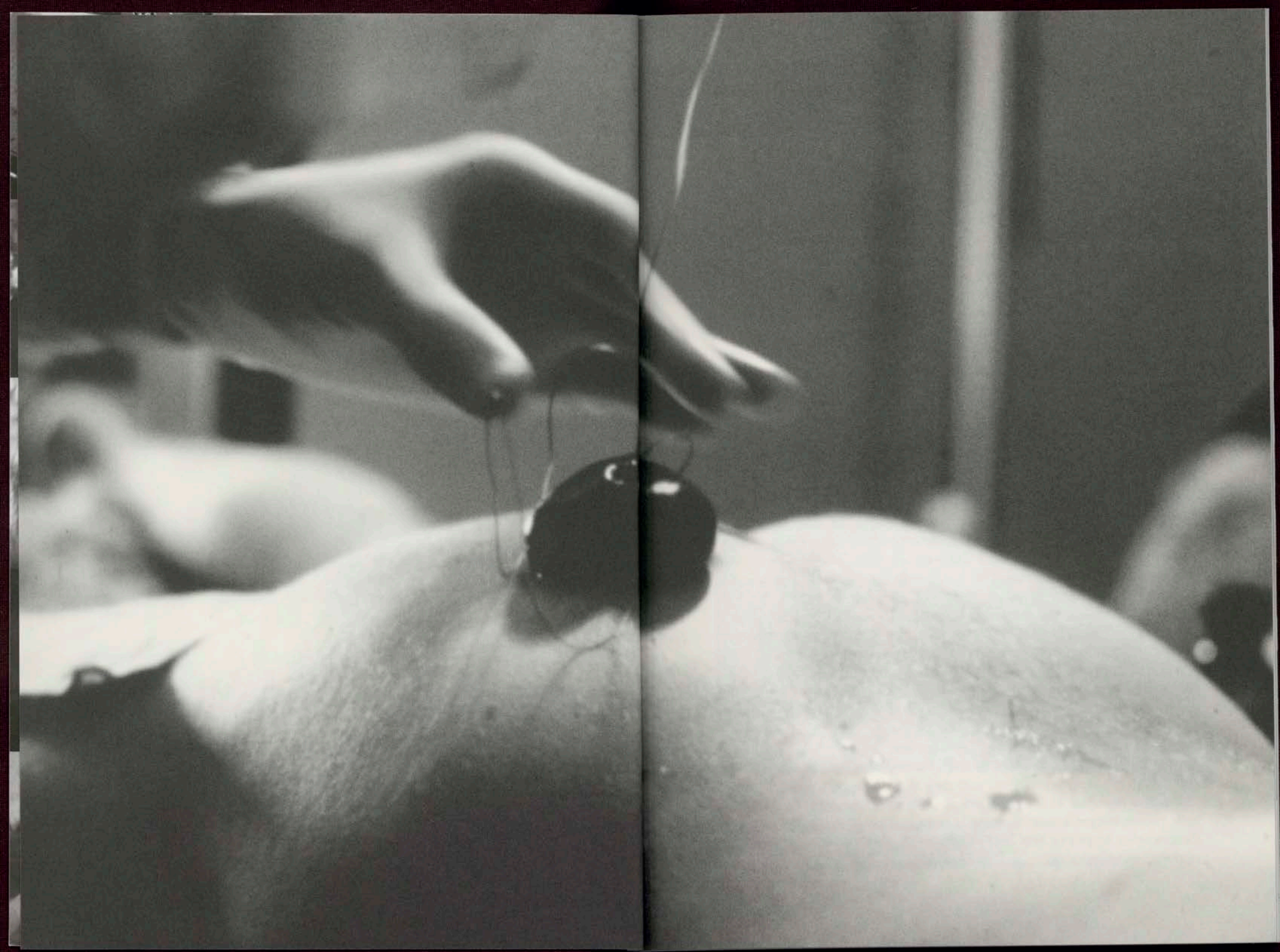


**ACTION REPLAY**  
POST-SCRIPT







## FOREWORD

IN 1998 ARTSPACE and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery collaborated to produce *Action Replay*, a series of five exhibitions critically re-evaluating a lost chapter in New Zealand art history – post-object art of the 1970s. *Action Replay* re-presented works by some 20 artists – films and videos, photographs, sculptures and installations, works on paper and paintings, and sound pieces. The project sought to redress the historical neglect post-object work has suffered, due partly to its ephemeral nature and partly to public gallery resistance to collecting it. The project also aimed to engage audiences tuned in to more recent installation and camera-based work with earlier art that paved the way. The ephemeral nature of the work posed challenges for the curators: how to re-install site-specific work, how to remake work long-since destroyed, and how to make secondary documentation engaging. These challenges entailed deeper questions regarding what constitutes an artwork, the status of documentation, the validity of memory and the occlusions of history. This publication, which comes well after the exhibitions, does not document them, but devolves from the curatorial process and issues it raised. Essays by Christina Barton and Wylan Curnow, written after the exhibitions and at a tangent to them, are prefaced by a revised version of the original curatorial introduction for the exhibitions.

The two essays dovetail. Post-object art supposedly prioritised immediacy, direct address and “the real”. But being typically ephemeral, temporary and site-specific, it made documentation crucial. Barton’s and Curnow’s essays explore post-object art through its documentary “supplements” – photography and writing respectively – finding them to be keys to the art’s problematics. Curnow’s autobiographical essay explores his work as post-object art’s key witness and spokesman. With hindsight he brings new considerations to bear on the relationships between his texts and their conceptual and material contexts. Barton’s essay is more archaeological, the work of a subsequent researcher accessing the work of the period through its fragile archive of documents and photographic relics.

As *Action Replay*’s final instalment, this publication continues our examination of contemporary art’s recent past, the context from which both our galleries emerged. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has developed a special rapport with the critical practices inaugurated by post-object art. It opened in February 1970 – the beginning of *Action Replay*’s decade – with a one-of-a-kind sound and light installation by a virtual unknown, recent Elam graduate Leon Narbey. *Real Time* was a foundational moment in New Zealand art. Now home to the Len Lye Foundation and Archive, and with active artist-in-residence, exhibition and publication programmes, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery seeks every opportunity to provide an historical focus and a critical context for its operations. Established in 1987, Artspace is also progeny of the “alternative” post-object art tradition, particularly of artist-run initiatives like *ANZART*, *F1: Sculpture Project* and *Art in Dunedin*. With early solo shows dedicated to the work of Billy Apple, Philip Dadson and Terrence Handscomb, and projects by Bruce Barber, Pauline Rhodes and Christine Hellyar, Artspace has developed its programme in relation to the evolving trajectories of conceptual, installation-based and photographically-derived practices.

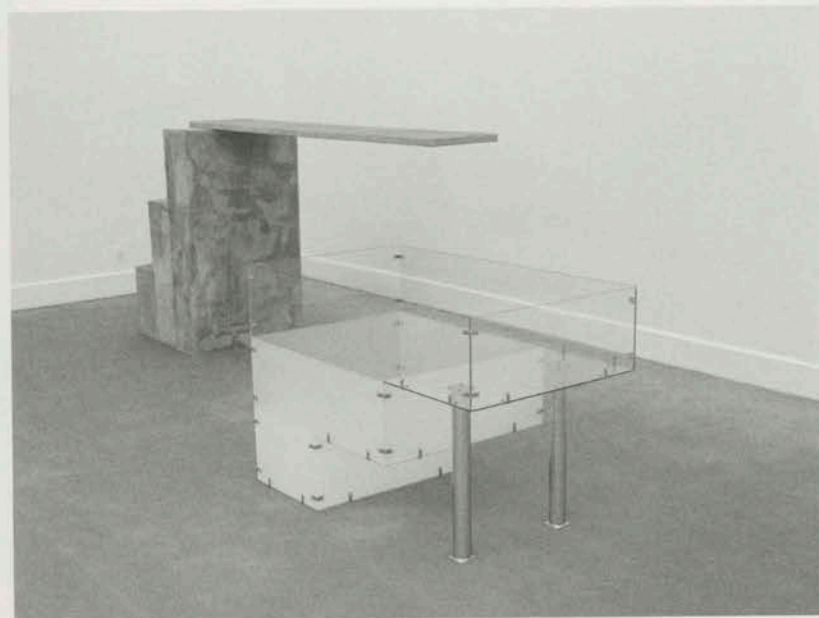
While both galleries are committed to looking forward, we also know the value of looking back. Although the influence and importance of post-object art has not always been accepted, its legacy is undeniable in the art of today. We hope this document will help put post-object art back on the agenda for the current moment. We would like to thank the artists, lenders, curators and friends who helped realise the project. Special thanks go to Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki for facilitating our presentation of Colin McCahon’s *Blind I-V* (1974) alongside works by Mel Bochner and Adrian Hall.

**Gregory Burke**

Director, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

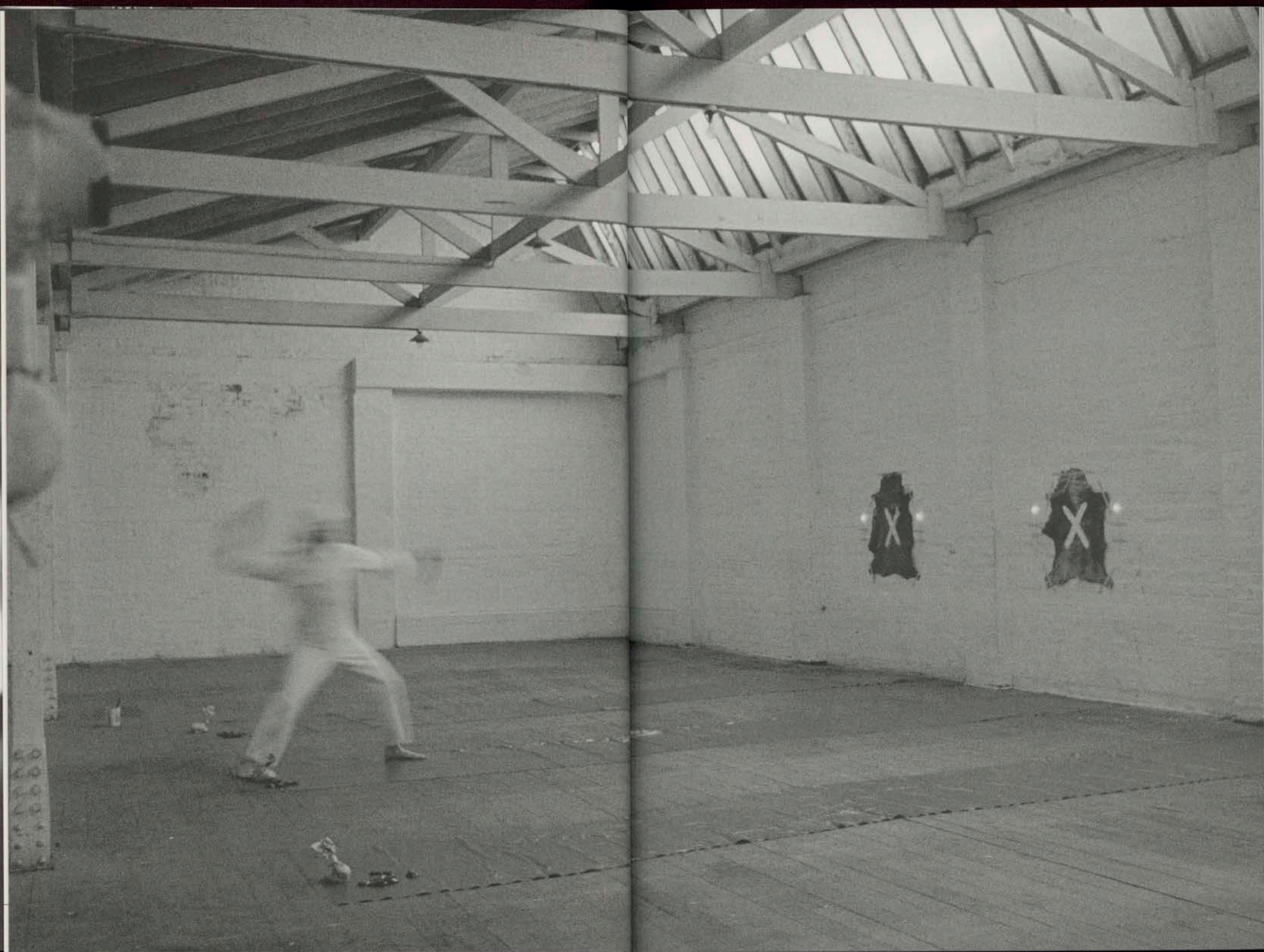
**Robert Leonard**

Director, Artspace

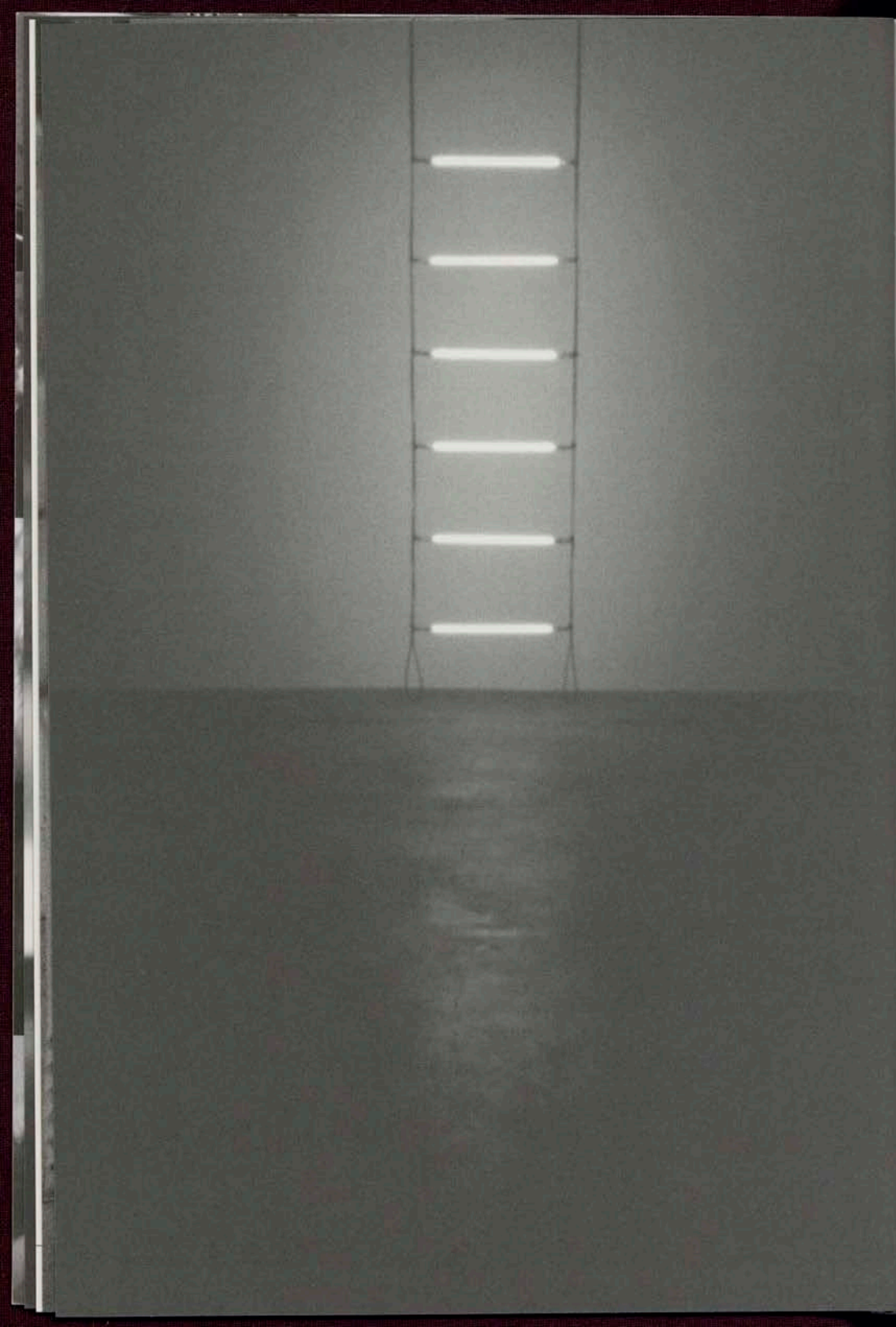


Maree Horner *Diving Board* (1974) glass, concrete, metal, wood; collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo: Bryan James. The work was restored for *Action Replay* at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Previous spread: Peter Roche, from *Transformation* (1977) slide sequence. Cover: Bruce Barber *Lead Performance* (1973) instructions for performance at Elam Lecture Theatre









## INTRODUCTION

*ACTION REPLAY REVISITED* a time and a milieu of radical art practice without parallel in this country's art history. 1970s post-object art broke with painting and sculpture as it had been practiced and set precedents for much of the art which followed. And yet the works are largely unknown due to the poor representation of post-object art in public collections and its inadequate coverage in the history books. With works assembled in the main from the artists' own collections, or remade for the occasion, *Action Replay* recovered a crucial chapter in the history of contemporary New Zealand art.

*Action Replay* presented works by more than 20 artists in a sequence of curatorial sketches at Artspace and Auckland Art Gallery, and a consolidated presentation at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Post-object art was represented broadly, but not systematically. This was not an historical survey; each sketch proposed a distinctive but characteristic mix of media and subject, rather than a chronological or thematic moment. Offsetting such economies was a display of documentation from the period from the archives of the Auckland Art Gallery.

The 1970s was the decade in which the elements of the contemporary art scene as we know it emerged and began to link up. The period saw the development of an art market, the creation of a national infrastructure of public galleries committed to contemporary art, the birth of local art magazines and the emergence of university art history departments. While post-object art made a significant contribution to this nascent system, it also existed at one remove. Partly this was because it took issue with aspects of the art system and partly because it possessed the independent energy and coherence of an art movement. This critical distance eventually took the form of collectives like the Artists Co-op with its Wellington woolstore, an early artist-run space, and the performance group From Scratch.

The term "post-object" defined the new practice by negation, indicating a desire to avoid the formal and political compromises that late modernist painting especially seemed mired in; but it also suggested, by inference, the copious bag of new materials, media and approaches – installation, performance, photography, video – that it broke open. Elsewhere this art was called "post-minimal", "conceptual" or "arte povera". Yet none of these terms does justice to the startling and exhilarating expansion of the field of the visual arts that took place during this time throughout the art world, or to the variety of new subjects or the freshness and directness of address that characterised the new work.

The post-object is one strand of the postmodern. It points up a reaction against the modernist confinement of meaning within the conventional limits of the art object (painting and sculpture), so shutting out its theoretical, social and economic circumstances as sources of meaning. Today the visual arts still involve objects. The initial denials of the visual implicit in terms like "minimalism" and "de-materialisation" now seem to belong to a transition, one not everywhere required. Indeed, the sequence – minimalism, conceptualism, post-minimalism

← Roger Peters *Blue Ladder* (1974) neon, electrical cable; installed in *Action Replay* at Artspace.

Photo: Jennifer French

Previous spread: Andrew Drummond *Onto Skin-Triptych Piece* from *Ngarauंगा Set* (1977–8) performance at Artists Co-op, Wellington



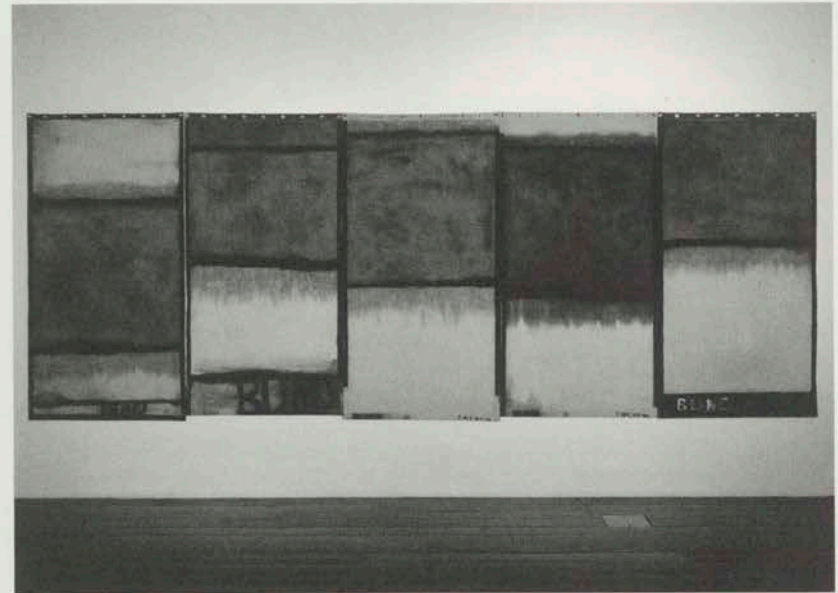
(post-object) – which characterised New Zealand art of the 1960s and 1970s was not duplicated anywhere else, even though post-object ways of making meaning are now more or less standard throughout the art world.

There was no New Zealand minimalism and very little that could be called classically conceptualist; the emergence of post-object work in New Zealand coincided with the emergence, not with the supersession, of formalist abstraction as in New York. That is to say the local post-object moment was not notably mediated by American practices. Artists travelled to London not New York, and visitors (including expatriates) usually arrived here from there. This was the traditional colonial pattern. If there is a connecting thread, and a group of practices that replaces minimalism as a transition to the post-object, it is kineticism, focused on movement and light. This was hardly a major theme of British art of the time, yet it played a vital role in Jim Allen's development and played a part in the progress of artists as different as Billy Apple, Andrew Drummond and Leon Narbey.

Post-object art replaces the inert picturing of things, ideas and events, preferring to simply situate or re-stage them in their actuality. Hall arranges concrete blocks in a gallery space. Colin McCahon's *Blind* (1974) is literally painted on canvas blinds. Performances by Andrew Drummond, Peter Roche and Bruce Barber are real events documented and represented as videos or slides, while John Lethbridge's photographs are like stills documenting such performances. The environments of Allen and Narbey are performative in another way: the viewer's own movement activates sounds or lights. And there are works which are literally sensational: that emit real light (Jim Allen), that produce real sounds (Billy Apple/Annea Lockwood), that generate actual heat (Roger Peters). Either way the physical body is a measure or an index – and sometimes a highly visceral one – not only of actuality, but also of subjectivity and the social. Although the conceptual, language-based artists Terrence Handscomb, Mel Bocher and Betty Collings present themselves as more cerebral than physical, they too are concerned with the body and with actualising the processes of their work's making. The words, numbers and symbols of their notations and diagrams present language in action. So there are common features to post-object work despite the striking variety of forms, subjects and media.

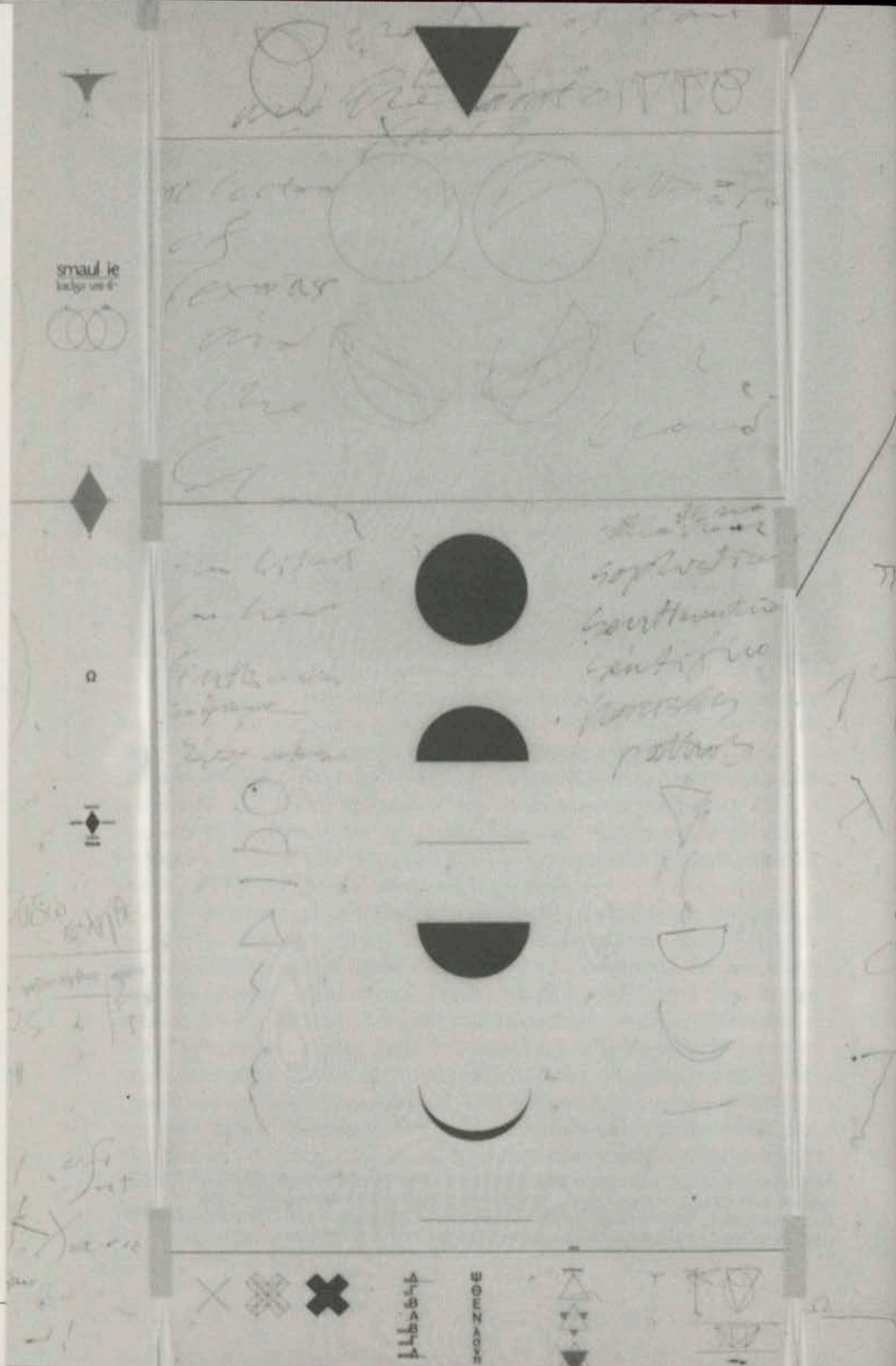
The major bases of the post-object scene were the art schools, especially Elam School of Fine Art at the University of Auckland during Jim Allen's tenure as Head of Sculpture, and to a lesser extent the Ilam School of Fine Art at the University of Canterbury under Tom Taylor. Largely through the bold efforts of John Maynard as the first director of New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, and later Ian Hunter, Nick Spill and Andrew Drummond at Wellington's National Art Gallery, the public gallery system served as a significant if occasional venue for post-object projects. Other public galleries, such as Manawatu Art Gallery under the directorship of Luit Bieringa, were occasional players. A few dealers like Auckland's Barry Lett Galleries (later RKS) were also important. Commonly, projects of the era critically addressed the exhibition site, challenging the physical and curatorial limits of orthodox gallery spaces, or appropriating non-art sites like Mount Eden crater, Bledisloe Place, Cathedral Square, the abandoned Ngarauanga meatworks and Epsom showgrounds, incorporating aspects of such sites into the work.

The scene was stimulated and informed by a small but steady flow of visiting artists from



Colin McCahon *Blind I-V* (1974) oil on unstretched canvases; panels left to right collections of Jan and Trevor Farmer, Auckland; Robin and Erika Congreve, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; installed in *Action Replay* at Auckland Art Gallery (1998). Photo: Jennifer French. Reproduced courtesy Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust





Britain and North America. Jim Allen was instrumental in bringing to Elam, as visiting teachers, a number of young sculptors with very current information, including John Panting, Adrian Hall and Kieran Lyons. Added to that was the return as a student of Philip Dadson following a stint with Cornelius Cardew's London Scratch Orchestra. Ian Hunter came out from the United Kingdom. Andrew Drummond returned from Canada and a meeting with Joseph Beuys in Edinburgh. Billy Apple, then based in New York, made two substantial visits involving many exhibitions during the decade, before returning here permanently in the 1980s. Darcy Lange made a return visit. As elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s, universities were hothouses of creative and political action, with a highly precocious generation of students coming out of the art schools, Bruce Barber, Maree Horner, Christine Hellyar and Roger Peters among them.

Crucial as all the input of visitors was to the independent energy and coherence of the post-object scene, the coming and going was also a measure of its instability and impermanence. The small scale of the New Zealand art scene and the difficulty of sustaining a post-object practice took its toll: some artists left the country, some gave up art altogether. Nevertheless, *Action Replay* showed that post-object art captured the intellectual high ground of the period and displayed a creative engagement with international contemporary art practice, only in the 1990s have we come to take this for granted.

**Wystan Curnow with Christina Barton, John Hurrell and Robert Leonard**  
*Action Replay* curatorium

← Terrence Handscomb *Kant on Kant* (1977) detail; mixed media on polyester drafting film. Photo: Bryan James



Peter O'Toole, Sophia Loren and James Coburn dream The Impossible Dream in an Arthur Hiller film

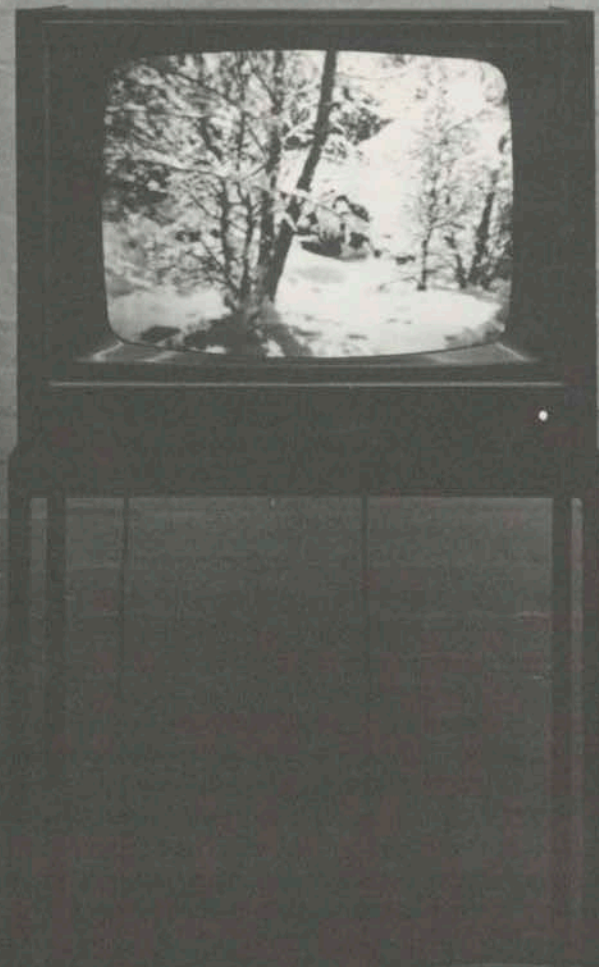
# "Man of Mancha"



"WHAT WAS DIRECTLY LIVED HAS MOVED  
PHOTOGRAPHY AND

AWAY INTO A REPRESENTATION." <sup>1</sup>  
POST-OBJECT ART





"POST-OBJECT ART" is a catch-all label for work deriving from the expanded field of experimental sculpture that emerged in New Zealand in the late 1960s, in performance, installation and intermedia. The "post" of post-object art denotes a desire to go beyond "the object", which had become freighted with oppressive values and meanings, to refocus on actual bodies, processes, ephemeral situations, specific sites, everyday materials and new technologies. What remains of such activity is a fragile archive of displaced traces: photographs, film footage, videotapes, notes, diagrams, drawings, sound recordings, publications, private memories. My research, based entirely on this surviving documentation, has so far been to reconstitute and explain post-object practices and retrieve them for art history.<sup>2</sup> This essay, however, seeks to rethink post-object art not in terms of what has been lost but rather for what remains, focusing on one particular dimension of this archive, its photographic legacy.

Post-object artists' engagement with photography is an early, indeed necessary, instance of activity that addressed – consciously or unconsciously – the condition of "moving away into representation" that Guy Debord invoked in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The photographic remnants of post-object art are no mere by-products. They signal the creeping mediation of reproductive technologies as a condition of our postmodern moment. Although post-object art sought to circumvent the production of discrete and privileged objects in order to break down modernist autonomy, to draw attention to the contingency of art, and thus to operate within the social realm, reproductive images and technologies were integral to its meaning and function.

IN THE 1970s it was exactly photography's freedom from the baggage of fine art that drew artists seeking an alternative to the aesthetic tyrannies of late modernism. While art photographers were arguing their case for a place for photography in the pantheon of high art, post-object artists were using the camera as a recording device in their moves away from that institutional framework. Disinterested in its aesthetic qualities and technical aspects, they undertook photography in the manner of the amateur snapshot or the scientific record.

Post-object artists' use of photography was both critical and complementary; a conscious alternative to traditional media, but also a mechanism to add meaning without investing art with value. It suited artists seeking to evade the system to break down barriers separating them from their audiences and assert a new and radical temporality, for such records of live actions or situations afforded the raw encounter a non-reified afterlife. This was because the photograph and its derivatives had both a contingent connection to physical and material subjects in the social environment and a non-hierarchical relation to the discursive fields within which meanings were produced and information circulated. The photo-document had an ambivalent status as a work of art. It served instead as a site for further work, where the conceptual process could continue.

There were solid theoretical grounds for this. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has pointed out, in modern industrial societies photography is historically the means by which the world is represented.<sup>3</sup> Indeed photography's pervasiveness has naturalised it. So to post-object artists,

← Roger Peters *Snowfall* (1975) closed circuit video screening of a photograph, installed in *Songs of the Earth* at Auckland City Art Gallery (1975). Photo: John Daley  
Previous spread: Bruce Barber, from *Kiss* (1974) slide-tape sequence



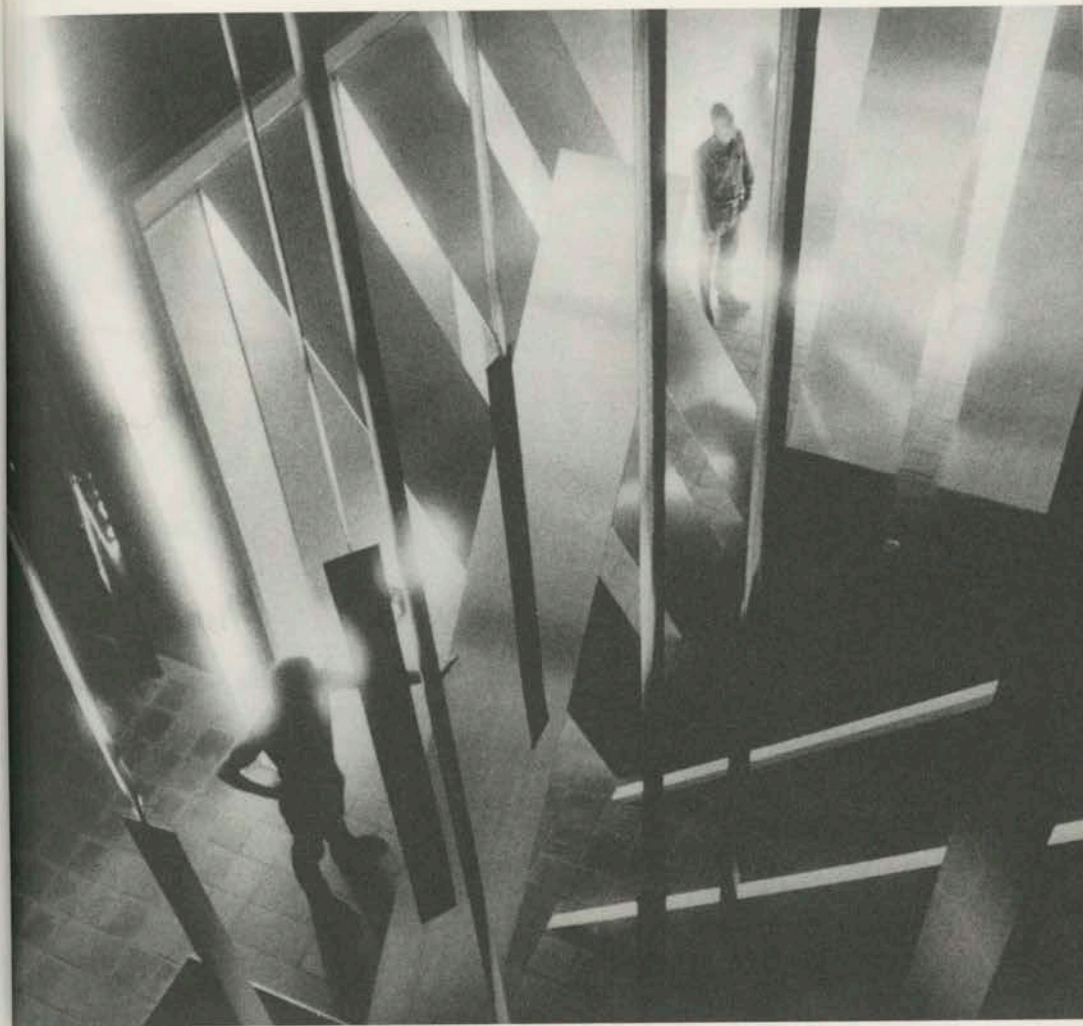
photography's myriad everyday uses made it seem more closely coupled to the world and less easily separated into the autonomous arena of art. Further, as Walter Benjamin had persuasively argued, photography's reproducibility posed a vital challenge to art's autonomy and proposed a new function for the visual within society.<sup>4</sup> Photo-documentation in artists' books, journals, catalogues and publications, like other forms of reproduction, could be democratically distributed and its social nature underscored. As Dan Graham has argued, work gained a "certain independence" by "belonging to the more general cultural framework".<sup>5</sup>

This can be explained in semiotic terms as evidence of two intrinsic features of the medium: first, photography's intertextuality, and, second, its indexicality. The photograph, as one element in a hybrid practice, confirms post-object art's heterogenous operations across a range of discursive practices, denying modernism's central claim to the essential specificity of each medium. Not only was photography one of many modes utilised by artists, but visual images were used to shift attention away from the physical components of a work, to relay different temporal moments (through feedback and time delay) or to upset spatial parameters and boundaries. Once reproduced as secondary documentation, the photograph operated in an intermediate zone, between the now past event and the proliferating space of reproduction.

Leon Narbey's *A Film of Real Time* (1971) is typical. This short film documented visual and spatial effects, sounds and kinetic sensations from his multi-media environment *Real Time* (1970). Narbey treated film as a suitably fluid and contingent medium to blur distinctions between temporary sculpture and permanent document. Narbey denied film its illusionistic or narrative uses, to work instead with its material qualities — sound, light, colour and movement — creating a visual and aural analogue to physical immersion in his multi-sensory, three-dimensional work. The camera functioned mechanically to record events as they happened, but it also performed reflexively, to recall the original work's kinaesthetic effects as discombobulating experience. This effect and the differences between the work's spatial/sculptural and temporal/filmic forms are what the work is about: the medium is indeed the message.

Rosalind Krauss has argued that "the photograph is . . . genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm-prints, death masks, cast shadows . . . Technically and semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes."<sup>6</sup> According to Krauss, photographs have an indexical relation to reality because the process produces images that not only resemble the objects they represent, but bear the direct traces of them. The photographic image has an existential relation to the world that is beholden and contiguous. Although it deals in appearances, it is patently not illustrative.

No wonder post-object artists were drawn to photography, just as they used other indexical processes to evade the distancing effects of representation. Pauline Rhodes' rust-stain grids on paper demonstrate her commitment to a working process designed to allow time and weather to leave their marks. Their mode of transfer — from world to work — is in essence indexical. So too is Kim Gray's use of light in *Time Wedge* (1971). She funnelled a ray of sunlight into a specially constructed box at exactly midday on 24 September, the spring equinox; creating a kind of camera obscura to capture a specific moment.



Leon Narbey *Real Time* (1970) installed at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery





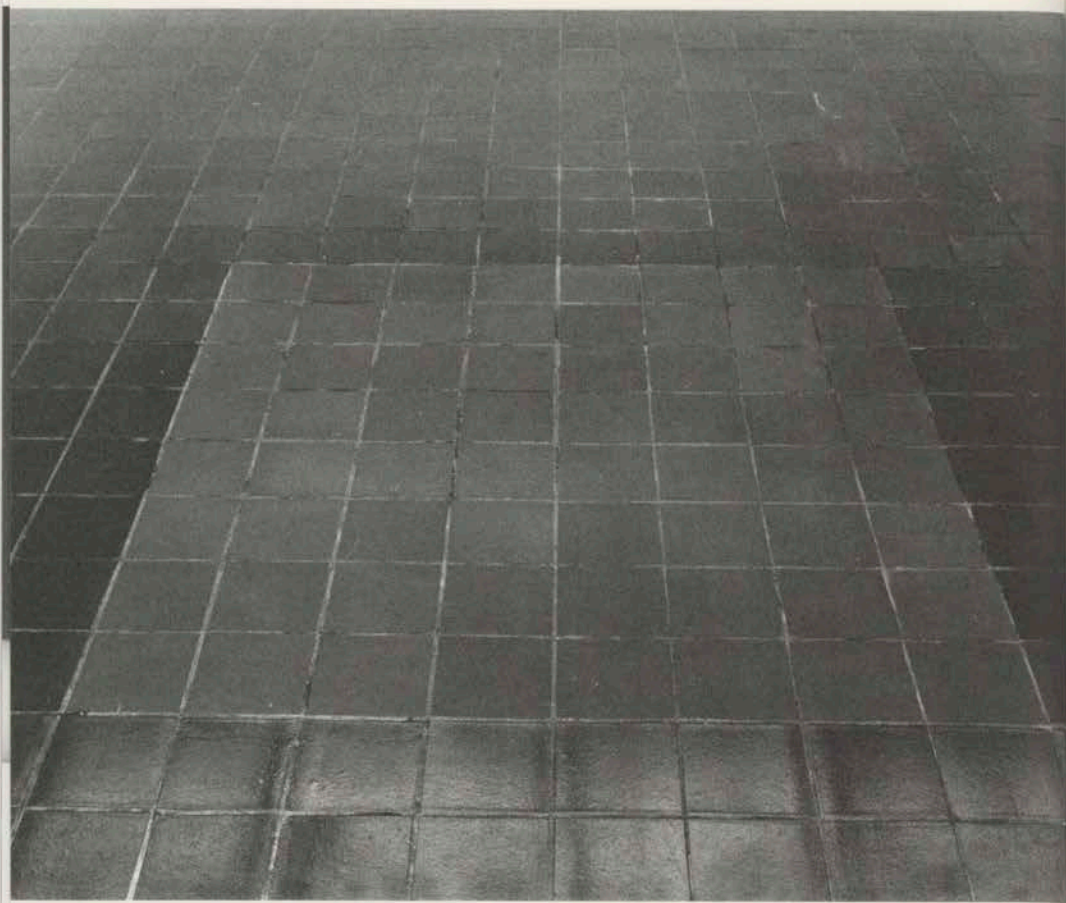
Bruce Barber, from *Kiss* (1974) slide-tape sequence

Krauss' contention may explain photography's special relation to reality, but her argument pointedly posits the photographic image as a category of sign, and thus an element of language, of a different order to the sensory experience of reality. As Bruce Barber stated, the point was not to frame experience (the illusory nature of this task was understood), but to frame "the sets and contingencies through which experience may be obtained".<sup>7</sup> Thus the photograph was not used in the belief that it might transcend its status as sign, in some pure and unmediated relation to the real. Photographic meaning was not considered inherent in the image but was recognised as being produced in relation to context, usage and the specific capabilities of the apparatus. Artists used photography reflexively to point out the difference between past and present, duration and the instant, to highlight the tenuous connection between the there of the world and the here of the photograph. So photography served as a means to critically reflect on representation, its relation to perception, social application and ideological effect.

*Kiss* (1974), a slide-tape piece by Bruce Barber, achieved such critical reflection. The slide sequence documented the artist walking up to and kissing the image of Sophia Loren on a billboard advertising the movie *The Man from La Mancha*. It was accompanied by a voice-over of his wife, Pauline Barber, reading a passage from anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* reflecting on the place of women in non-Western culture. Here, real action was undertaken in relation to a mass-produced, spectacular image, then re-presented as a sequence of projected images reminiscent of a film experience. The complex positioning of photography in the work made the point that our lives and desires are mediated by images, and that any response to this realisation can only occur through a similar process of mediation.

For post-object artists photography served as a means to re-examine the status of the art object in both ontological and epistemological terms. For example, in documenting objects that had been set up expressly for the camera, Bill Culbert, Boyd Webb and Pauline Rhodes proposed a cognitive and perceptual conundrum. These objects might have once had tangible life as "sculpture" in the tradition of the assemblage or site-specific marker, but as photographs they were only images. The physicality of the object was replaced by an evanescent trace, contrasting the experience of being in the same space as the object with a representation of what no longer existed. These works were not concerned with the visual (in formal or expressive terms) but rather dealt with what David Company has called "making visible".<sup>8</sup> That is, they functioned as metonyms of the representational process, whereby live events are granted meaning by being fixed by the camera, just as meaning is produced when an artwork is placed into a discursive framework. As Jeff Wall argues, "it is this contradiction between the unavoidable process of depicting appearances, and the equally unavoidable process of making objects that permits photography to become a model of an art whose subject matter is the idea of art".<sup>9</sup>





Billy Apple *8 x 8: A Subtraction* (1975) wax polish removed from floor tiles at Auckland City Art Gallery.  
Photo: John Daley

POST-OBJECT ARTISTS recognised the growing pressure of representation's grasp. In translating the experiential into art they offered up traces of the real in modes not derived from the formal language of art, while recognising art as one of a number of structured representational systems. Their work's intertextual materiality did much to undermine art's autonomy and stitch it back into the systems of communication commonly available in everyday life, blurring the boundaries between artwork and commentary, and breaking down the priority of the former to insert a critical, self-reflexive dimension. This critical dimension is evident in the relation between primary event and secondary documentation, but it is also a feature at that further level of mediation, when documentation was subsequently published and circulated. It is at this third level that the specific function of photography as text is revealed. This trajectory confirms post-object art as conceptual and interdiscursive rather than physical and discrete, and positions it at a liminal point in the progressive drift towards the postmodern.

This trajectory can be charted by closer examination of specific instances. Billy Apple's *8 x 8: A Subtraction* (1975) – where the artist removed wax polish from a square of 64 floor tiles at the Auckland City Art Gallery – was recorded by gallery photographer John Daley, and his photographs were published with a commentary by Wystan Curnow in an issue of the Gallery's *Quarterly*.<sup>10</sup> These photographs, while not strictly formalist, fix the view, offering a stark alternative to the actual experience of the work in situ. Minimalist procedure, with its emphasis on phenomenological effect, was replaced by the rigid symmetry and instantaneous fixity of single-point perspective. No doubt on the artist's instruction, the photographer presented an ideal view to highlight the shift from real experience to documentary exegesis. To achieve this shift author and photographer were required to take up an objective vantage point from which to view the work. Thus the ordered stasis of the perspectives organising the photographs serves as a visual equivalent to the critical distance evident in the writing. Both confirm the logical separation of art and commentary and the priority of the live event in light of its subsequent explication.

And yet this shift is complicated by the fact that the work only survives as documentation. Unlike other reproductions in the journal, Daley's photographs do not illustrate some real but absent object. Set amongst conventional art historical essays, Apple's images and Curnow's commentary appear problematic in standing-in for a now non-existent original. The photographs function like uncanny doubles with their own supplementary meaning. For the removal of the floor wax, which typified Apple's ambition to make work out of the givens of the situation, had an indexical relation to the space similar to the photograph's indexical relation to the work. Both were granted meaning that was contingent, both therefore refused art's autonomy, and the distance between art object and documentation was blurred.

Moving to the early 1980s and the performance work of Peter Roche and Linda Buis we find a different order of documentation. Their performances were structured around the dynamics of physical and psychological interaction, and their negotiation of the relationship between performers and spectators. Each work was undertaken over a particular period of time and acted out within the confines of a specific context. If the accounts of those exemplary witnesses Tony Green and Wystan Curnow are anything to go by, these were not comfortable affairs. For the



repetitive, arduous and at times emotionally charged interchanges were designed to viscerally engage the audience, make them face their own reactions and their role as observers.

Given the particular function that duration played in Roche and Buis' work, it comes as some surprise that their published documentation, which is some of the most visually arresting of the period, always consisted of single images that distilled particular moments.<sup>11</sup> Though they occasionally used film in the process of making work they preferred still imagery as its primary form of documentation and distribution. Photographers Ron Brownson and Gregory Burke recorded the various stages of each work and captured key moments. But they were not working on instruction, rather responding as collaborators. Thus their images supplemented the action as a form of visual commentary or critical interpolation, being less pictures *of* the work than *about* the work.

In the context of a journal article these photographs continued to function discursively, but as one order of sign amongst others. "Peter Roche/Linda Buis: A Gathering Concerning Three Performances", compiled by Wylan Curnow, was published in *Parallax* in 1983.<sup>12</sup> First-hand accounts by Curnow and Green were interspersed with recollections and commentaries by the artists, set alongside uncaptioned images whose scale and presentation mirrored the textual page layout. The piece functioned as a non-linear, first-person, multi-voiced, written and visual record, where images and words were equivalent "texts". By denying the critical distance of objective interpretation, and by a process of experiential montage and compilation, the performance was re-presented without recourse to traditional exegesis, in a form that made the reader aware of the pitfalls of historical reconstruction.

In its shifts from live action to recollection, from the movement of actual bodies to the stasis of single images, in its slippage from linear time to the shifting temporal zones of memory and intention, and in its multiple and proliferating viewpoints, this text declared its difference from both live performance and art history's usual expository styles and formats. The piece did not assume that the object of art can be fixed and anatomised, granted a single meaning, indeed it did not have a single author. Crucially, with its tolerance for different interpretations, its indifference to faulty memory or misplaced emphasis, it acknowledged problems of representation. It is not surprising that it appeared in a journal of postmodern literature and art (indeed the first of its kind in New Zealand). Here, perhaps for the first time, an intertextual reading of a work was postulated, indeed where new work was done in the absence of the original.

PHOTO-DOCUMENTATION WAS a critical aspect of post-object art, as was the use of photographs, photocopies, film and video in the execution of work. This was evidence of the growing presence of reproductive technologies as a force shaping both art and everyday life in the 1970s. It suggests that post-object artists, despite their resistance to photography's mediating effects, co-opted the apparatuses and systems by which mass-media imagery had so effectively colonised their social realm, to specific critical ends. If one were to (re)write a history of New Zealand art of this decade it would be necessary to link the work of post-object artists to the work of artists in other areas also responding to changing social and cultural conditions and engaging in representational critique.<sup>13</sup>



Peter Roche and Linda Buis *Liason* (1980) performance at Real Pictures, Auckland. Photo: Gregory Burke

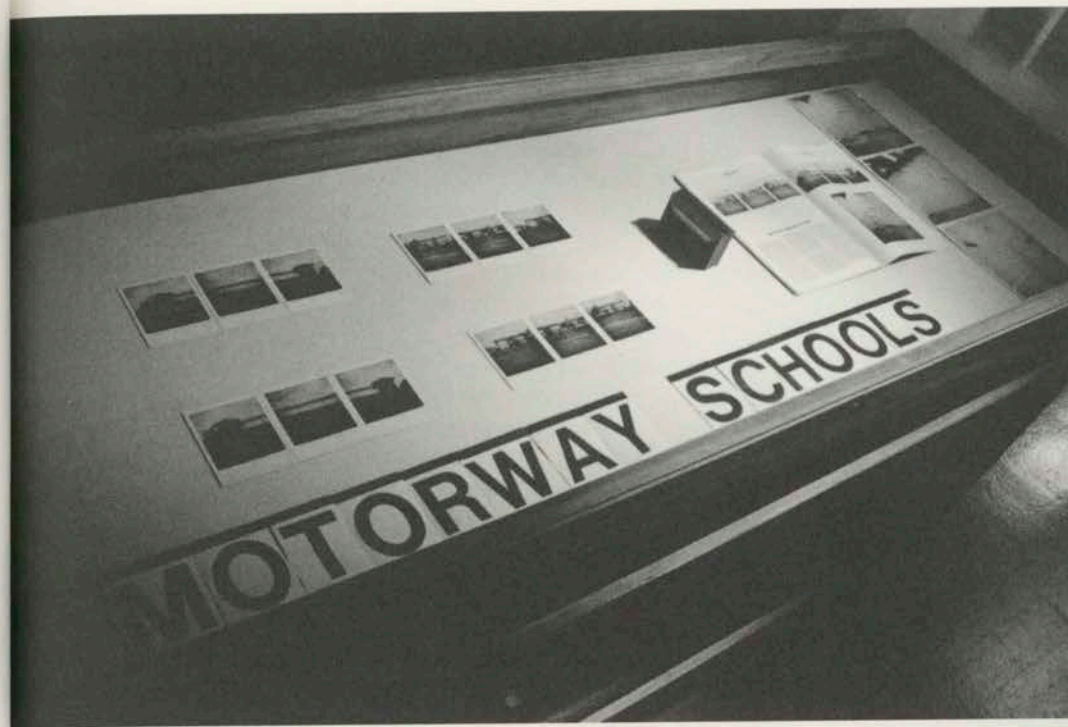


Such an account has been undertaken in Australia. In the early 1980s, Paul Taylor argued that Australian artists rarely had access to art other than in reproduction and that this was a key factor determining their antipodean cultural condition. He used Australia's lack of "originals" to distinguish Australia's art from that of Europe and America and proposed this as something of a manifesto:

When photographic rhetoric is accorded its status as signifier rather than signified in Australian art, it will not only be the photographic media that are released from the repression of painterly and sociological methodologies; Australian art as a whole will develop a discourse outside of those imposed on it.<sup>14</sup>

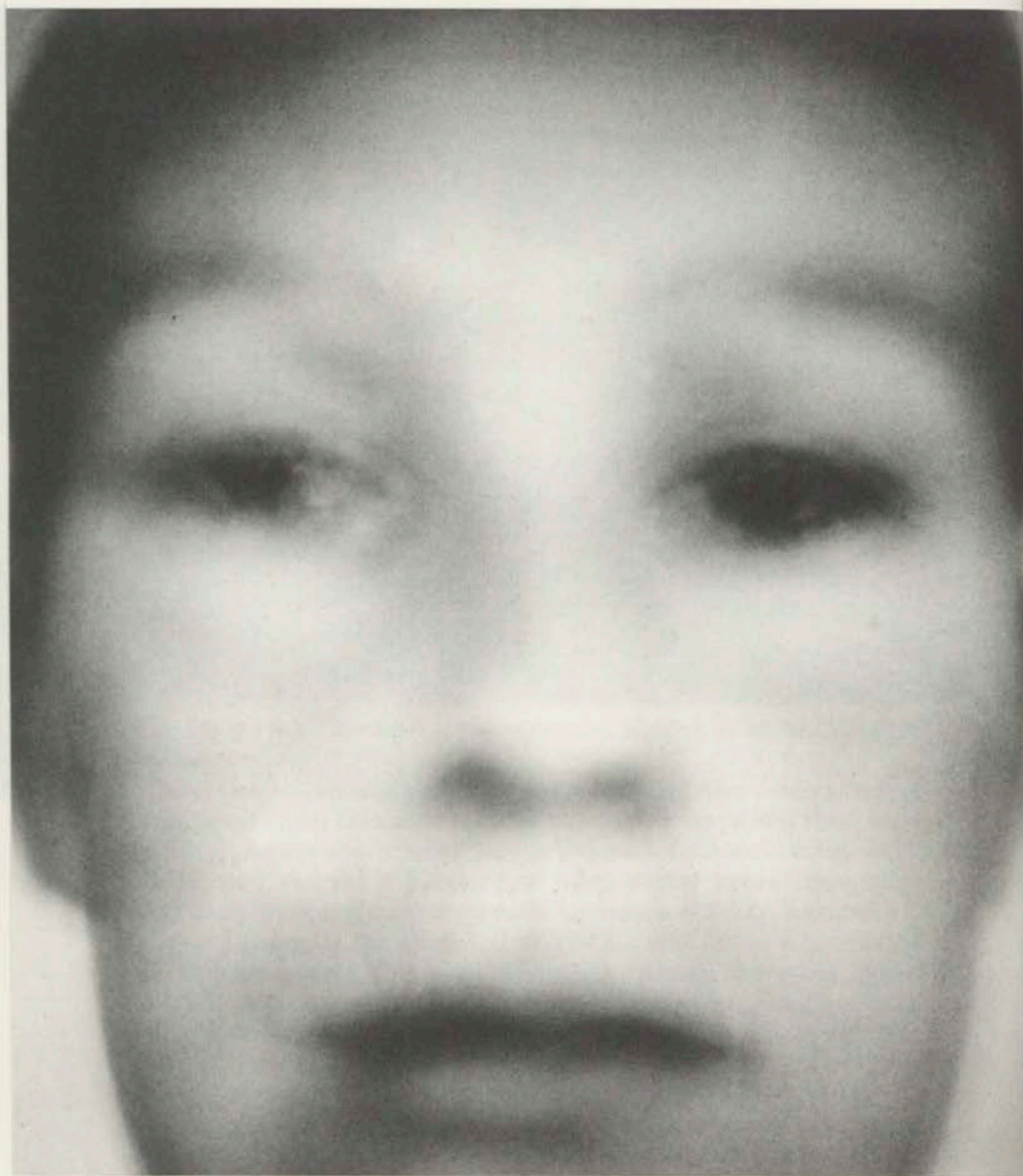
Taylor's argument gave shape to 1970s art in Australia and theoretical coherence to what followed. It also located Australia as a site for Baudrillard's fashionable notion of "the society of the simulacrum" and ensured the country a distinctive place in the global conceptualisation of postmodernism. While New Zealand undoubtedly shares Australia's isolation and its mediated access to modern cultural forms, no critic here offered a similar prognosis.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it is timely (if not overdue) that we retrospectively recast our art in similar terms. Taylor's contention – that the implications of reproduction was the crucial factor facing Australian artists – is applicable here. Indeed post-object art plays a crucial role in the transition to the postmodern, particularly because of the use it made of reproduction, exemplifying one critical strand of practice addressed to the "problem" of representation facing artists in the 1970s. Post-object art brings us to postmodernism's brink, away from "the real" and towards "the text". To demonstrate this, and to arrive where Debord has directed us, consider two works from the 1980s. Each is a product of the cultural conditions of the 1970s; each owes a debt to the procedures and concerns of post-object art, yet both may be distinguished from their predecessors, signalling the new terrain of 1980s postmodernism.

Julian Dashper's installation *Motorway Schools* (1980) consisted of four polaroid triptychs of a generic school building and a soundtrack of motorway traffic. It was shown at 100m<sup>2</sup>, one of New Zealand's first alternative art spaces.<sup>15</sup> Dashper's minimal and brief intervention into the old warehouse space, itself soon to disappear in the process of urban "renewal", spoke to that process through its focus on the bland impersonal functionalism of the city's infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, however, on three occasions (1989, 1994 and 1999) Dashper re-presented the work's component parts and its subsequent documentation – polaroids, cassette tape, signage, photographs of the installation by Peter Hannken and a copy of *Art New Zealand* open to Tim Walker's review – as stand-alone items in a museum vitrine. Dashper's re-working of the piece refers to the fate of site-specific work and to the operations of primary, secondary and tertiary documentation.<sup>17</sup> *Motorway Schools* was no longer about social circumstances, neither the effects of modern transport and the education system nor the real experience of the work as installation. Rather it was about the process of inscription of artistic acts as texts and their eventual institutionalisation and historicisation.



Julian Dashper *Motorway Schools* (1980) reconfigured for the exhibition *Julian Dashper Photography 1980–1994* (1994) at Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North. Photo: Athol McCredie





Gregory Burke, from *Viewing* (1985) colour photograph

In its quotation of conceptual art documentation, *Motorway Schools* is postmodern. By means of critical self-reflection the work is rendered impermeable both to the social realm of which it was once a part and to its critical or discursive milieu where commentators once effectively collaborated. It seems to now await acquisition by the museum, its ultimate *mise-en-abîme*. Dashper has shifted the tense of his practice from the "present-ness" of post-object art to the "past-ness" which is postmodernism's condition. We are witnesses to a subtle slippage, a waiving of the potential of post-object art, a knowing deferral to the power and pervasiveness of the frame, to the distancing effects of art as representation.

Gregory Burke's video installation *Viewing* (1985) also made a poignant comment on the meaning and function of representation in the era of photographic reproduction. It consisted of 13 large, framed colour photographs of blurry faces in extreme close-up, and a 21-minute video of similar imagery played on a monitor turned on its side with an ambient soundtrack of real and electronic noises. Here "viewing" itself was Burke's subject. He sought to test the codes and conventions of portraiture by blurring the boundaries between mug-shot and artistic expression, and by obviating the distinctions between idiosyncratic and generic characteristics and their relation to concepts of identity. His concern was not only with the artist's instrumental role in the process of viewing but also in establishing a context within which the audience might also engage such questions. Viewers were drawn in by the relentless gazes of the photographic subjects, held by the failure of the images to coalesce into recognisable features, and made uneasy by the impression that these faces did not "fit" their frames. The work required viewers to scrutinise their own perceptual and interpretative experiences, to ask what it means to see and be seen.

But Burke's images were not of living subjects. Both the video and the still photographs represent polaroid snapshots: the stills are massive enlargements of the originals, amplifying the image's dissolution into grain, and the video is edited from Super-8 footage of the images shot as they developed. Both are therefore photographs of photographs. While Burke might have referenced the performative, he was not concerned with live action, but with the mediating processes of representation and its effects on the viewed and viewing subject. Ultimately, by filming the automatic polaroid process, Burke shifted responsibility for the image from the artist to the technology. In making this process a subject of the work, he wrested apart the traditional relation of artist and object; throwing into question the aspirations and assumptions of the creative act. Like Dashper, his was a distancing act, to put space between art and life. Clearly, these works both demonstrate a deferral to the representational, which is a characteristic of more recent (post-)conceptual practices. No longer do live actions or real situations serve as the absent obverse to the photographic; instead meanings are folded into the realm of the represented.

Perhaps post-object art's subliminal fascination for the photographic was instrumental in its ultimate hyphenation from the very existential reality it sought to work within. However, post-object art's remainder – the photo-document – survives as a vital index and trace. In its ability

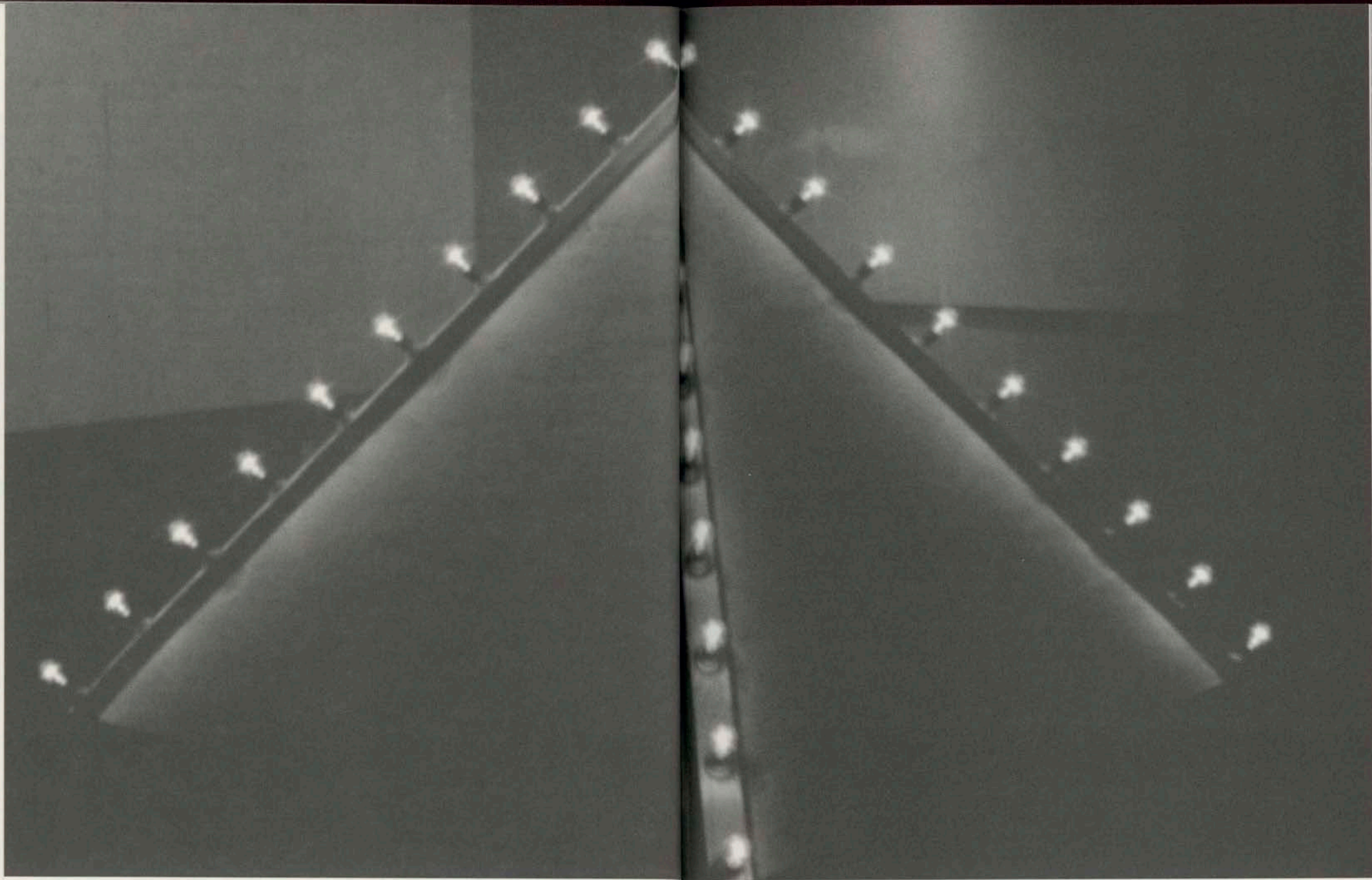


to work across and between event and text, it continues to inveigle the actual into discursive space. A history of the 1970s might then serve as valedictory to the possibilities of both art's isolation from and immediate connection with the "real". This is likely to be one of post-object art's most provocative and enduring legacies.

Christina Barton

1. Guy Debord *The Society of the Spectacle* Zone Books, New York, 1995. p12.
2. Christina Barton *Post-Object Art in New Zealand 1969–1979: Experiments in Art and Life* unpublished MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1987.
3. "Photography after Art Photography" *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991. p104.
4. Walter Benjamin "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Illuminations* Schocken Books, New York, 1969. pp217-51.
5. *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965–1990* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993. pxx.
6. "The Photographic Activity of Surrealism" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987. p31.
7. Artist's statement *Young Artists* New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, 1974. np.
8. "Conceptual Art History, or A Home for Homes for America" *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (eds. Michael Newman and Jon Bird) Reaktion Books, London, 1999. p138.
9. "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (eds. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer) Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995. p258.
10. Wistan Curnow "Billy Apple in New Zealand" *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 61 May 1976. pp10-23.
11. See for example Roche/Buis *Six Performances* Auckland, 1983.
12. Vol 1, No 2, Summer 1983. pp166-87.
13. Although beyond the scope of this essay, this would necessitate a discussion of the emergence of photography as a fine art medium, with its own infrastructure of publications, galleries, exhibitions and collections; and of the local independent and commercial film industry, with its many links and connections to the art scene. It would also distinguish between those artists using photography as an expressive modern art form and those reflexively investigating the nature of the medium and the role it plays in the mediation of lived experience and the construction of identity. In the wider cultural sphere one might also think through the debt to photography evident in a younger generation of painters, for example in the deadpan imagery of Richard Killeen, Alexis Hunter, Ian Scott, Dick Frizzell and Denys Watkins, or in the encroachments of photography in the collage fragments of Jacqueline Fahey and Philip Clairmont. One would also highlight the fact that in New Zealand artists encountered international art principally in reproduction and this perhaps accounts for abstract painters' fascination with licked surfaces (Ray Thorburn) and photogenic effects (Geoff Thornley and Gretchen Albrecht). Whether it was to bring the world more literally into the field of play or to defer to its mediations, photography defines the period.
14. See Paul Taylor *Eureka! Artists from Australia* I.C.A. and Serpentine Gallery, London, 1982. p66.
15. See *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970–1980* (ed. Paul Taylor) Art and Text, Melbourne, 1984. With this book Taylor sought to retrieve 1970s art from its historical oblivion, with essays on various modes of practice from leftist posters to feminist art, from modernist abstraction to conceptual art. Francis Pound may be the one critic who formulated an argument about the mediated and mediating nature of the visual in a New Zealand context, however his sole focus was painting.
16. The polaroids are all of Westlake Girls High School on Auckland's North Shore, a typical Nelson Block, taken by the artist from the playing field between the motorway and the school.
17. For contemporary responses to the exhibition see Tim Walker "Motorway Schools at 100m<sup>2</sup>" *Art New Zealand* 18 Summer 1980. pp50-1. Also Elizabeth Leyland "Motorway Schools" and Harry Osborne "Motorway Schools" from an October 1981 issue of *Craccum* (clipping from Frank Stark's 100m<sup>2</sup> archive).
18. *100m<sup>2</sup>: A 10 Year Survey* Artspace, Auckland, 1990; *Julian Dashper Photography 1980–1994* Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1994; and most recently *Time, Death and Narrative* Auckland Art Gallery, 1999 (where works by contemporary artists contextualised Colin McCahon's 1966 painting *The Way of the Cross*).

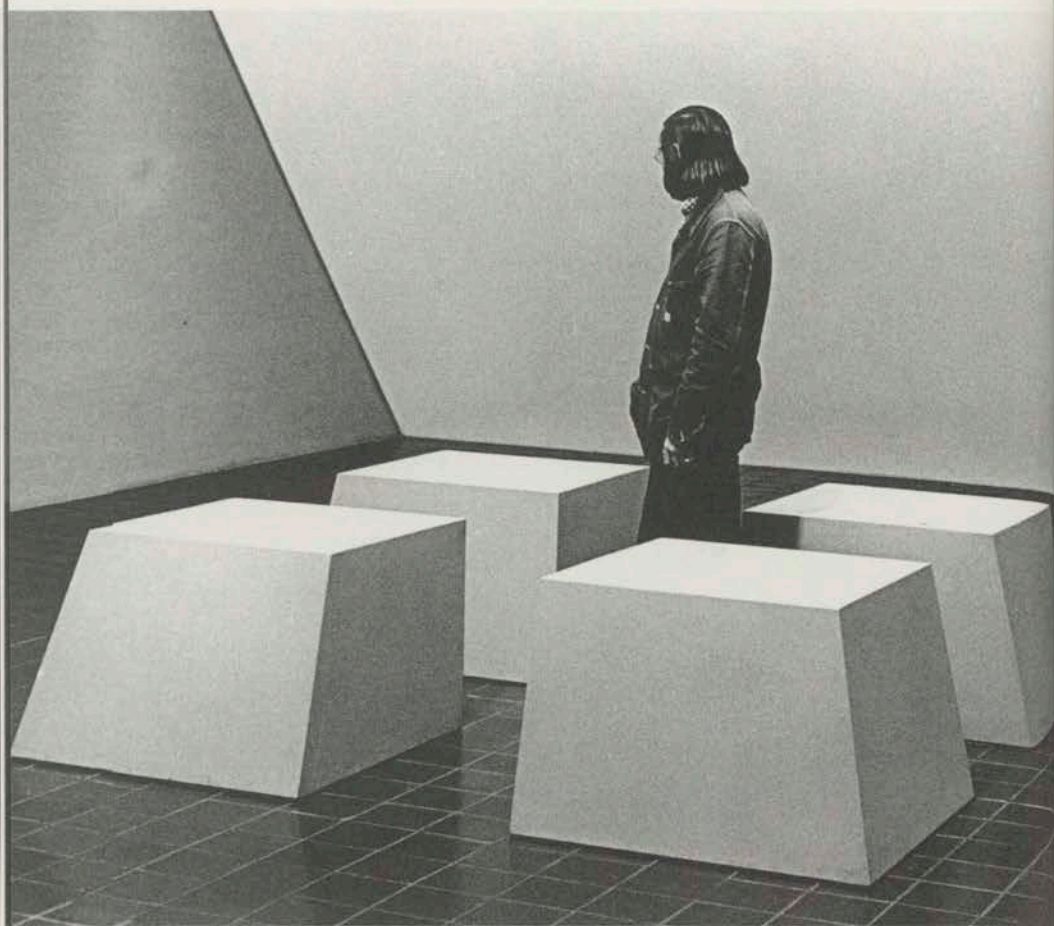




WRITING AND THE

POST OBJECT





Wystan Curnow standing in Robert Morris' *Untitled* (1965) in the exhibition *Some Recent American Art* at Auckland City Art Gallery (1975). Photo: Robin Morrison  
 Previous page: Adrian Hall *Pyramid* (1971) wood, electric lightbulbs; installed in *Plasma Cast Iron Foam Co. Presents Adrian Reginald Hall* at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland

1

STORY IS I had returned to New Zealand in 1970, aged 31, following a lengthy sojourn on the Eastern seaboard of the United States. I'd been there partly to be near to New York's galleries and museums, then the centre of the world far as art went. Doing the rounds in midtown New York through the 1960s was as good an education in contemporary art as one could want; supplemented, I should add, by a subscription to *Artforum*.<sup>1</sup> Coming back to Auckland it was post-object art that interested me most and this changed my relationship to the scene I had left, one that had been, and still was, a painters' scene; Pat Hanly, Don Binney and Robert Ellis loomed large. I had taken a job at Auckland University, which happened to be the centre of post-object activity in the city. Jim Allen, Head of the Elam Sculpture Department was on the lookout for anyone with current art information to thicken local knowledge, sharpen critical discussion, and write up the new work. Jim asked me to help out with "crit. sessions". He got me to write and read radio press releases on the 1971 *International Sculpture Symposium* and to contribute to a series of essays on New Zealand sculpture he'd arranged for *Education* magazine. Jim's commitment was relentless, his energy prodigious and his enthusiasm infectious; recruiting me as house critic was one of many things he did to make the School the base of a scene.<sup>2</sup>

I started writing art criticism in earnest in 1975, and largely out of an intense interest in post-object art – seven reviews appeared in *The Listener* that year. Post-object art was the subject of more than 25 pieces I wrote between 1975 and 1982, covering most of the artists in *Action Replay*. Jim Allen and I edited *New Art: Some Recent New Zealand Sculpture and Post-Object Art*, which featured the work of Bruce Barber, Leon Narbey, Maree Horner and Jim Allen.<sup>3</sup> Although Tony Green, as Auckland art editor for *Arts And Community* in the early 1970s, had been covering the post-object scene before I began, from 1975 on I became its most active interpreter and documenter.

Before I left for the States I'd done some reviewing for magazines like *Landfall* and *Comment*, but the times had changed and so had I. By the early 1970s it seemed to me that new art practices were making demands on critical practice so unusual that the implications for criticism as such could not be ignored. Joseph Kosuth declared that conceptual art "annexes the function of the critic, and makes a middleman unnecessary."<sup>4</sup> Well, this middleman – if that's what I am – got his real start in those years, as critic and also as a poet. And the question of writing's relation to the theory and practice of post-object art, as well as to criticism, was a marker of this change and remains so.<sup>5</sup>

Back then, in the 1970s, writing for the first time about Billy Apple's then upsetting art, his first exhibited in New Zealand, I wrote this:

Billy Apple's works took place, and returned it. They've gone for good. The places remain, willy nilly. The works survive only as photographs and as remembered experiences. Unlike much of his output of the 60s and 70s which was exhibited only in documentary form, these works make a peculiar appeal to the critic: to his sense of power and of responsibility. For photographs freeze only random portions of a viewer's experience, so that it is left to the critic alone, through his exemplary account, to preserve that experience, to resist the wilful ephemerality of the works. He is to see to it that they



retain their being in the body of that account. Through its fullness and concreteness, perhaps. We assume that our experiences of works which are permanent objects check out, they are repeatable and to that extent permanent too. And there's a resemblance, ontologically, between our experiences of ephemeral works and the works themselves, they too have gone for good. Whatever was good about them must be singled out by circling them in memory, multiplying the angles, opening them up to consciousness that they may be reclaimed for consciousness. Perhaps the critic should always behave as if the works he discusses were impermanent.<sup>6</sup>

And, I might have added, perhaps the critic should act as if the viewer always exercised a measure of authority (author-function) in the process of viewing.

The new art practices challenged the self-sufficiency of the art object, particularly by taking ephemeral form. But the demands exerted on criticism hardly ended there. Works conceived as lacking in autonomy, unity and centredness proposed viewers and a criticism similarly deprived, changing the relationship between work and viewer. Such works were bound to be misrepresented by a critical language developed for object-based art, and foreign to the viewer's new post-object situation.

Between 1971 and 1976 my writing ranged widely, from the journalistic to the scholarly to the literary and back again. My thinking was changing so fast that in retrospect it's hard to sort out the snarl of motives and occasions. In addition to the changes to art practice, there were personal circumstances. These included coping with culture shock returning to New Zealand; being of a certain age (on the threshold of adulthood); having diverse new opportunities for publication and yet finding my interests coincided with those of precious few people here. Tony Green, who had recently arrived from Britain to teach art history, was one such person. He became a constant companion in art in those years. His writing went through comparable changes; an art historian by profession he was becoming a poet by avocation. Roger Horrocks, with whom I was teaching American poetry, was also writing poetry.

Like the poets who edited and wrote for Wellington's arts broadsheet *Spleen*, Tony and I were captivated by the poetry and prose of the New American poets and impressed by the colloquial immediacies of the New Journalism.<sup>7</sup> In many writing situations at the time, some extremely demanding, formal expository prose uninformed by the energies of speech appeared to be at a serious disadvantage. "Out of it", we would say. Protest actions, counter-culture gatherings, as well as art performances, seemed to draw writing into something more like action than acting. *New Art*, which appeared in the same period, looks and reads more like a glossy hardcover version of *Spleen* than a regular art book. Both, for example, made much use of tape recorded interviews and discussions.<sup>8</sup> My 1975 catalogue essay for McCahon's *Necessary Protection* exhibition contains obvious echoes of the prose of American poet Charles Olson and references to Allen Ginsberg.<sup>9</sup> Though the writings of the American artists Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner and Robert Morris held great interest, it was the prose of poets that influenced the changes in the writing of Tony Green and myself, and was responsible for reinforcing the view that critical discourse is neither neutral nor transparent and that the relations and differences between art and criticism are constantly under negotiation.<sup>10</sup>

In the States I was first of all a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, mainly under the guidance of an unruly genius by the name of Morse Peckham, who at the time was writing a book called *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behaviour and the Arts*.<sup>11</sup> Under his tutelage, and in assimilating his ideas, I learnt how to have ideas of my own. Peckham had little interest in contemporary art – 19th century literature was his field – yet his book was widely read by artists and critics. Robert Morris cites him throughout his influential essay "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated":

Authors such as Morse Peckham have looked at art as behaviour, but from the point of view of discovering its possible social function. He and others divide the enterprise into two basic categories: the artist's role playing on the one hand and speculations on the general semiotic function of art on the other. My particular focus (in terms of art as a way of making) lies partly within the former category and not at all within the latter . . .<sup>12</sup>

Morris ends referring to Peckham's view that the structures of the art system provide, or should provide, the conditions, specifically the necessary "psychic insulation", for art to challenge ideology, or what he called the ruling "orientation".

Readers who know something of my essays of the 1970s will recognise this idea. If my critical writing on post-object art was initially motivated by a desire to draw on my New York art education, essays like "High Culture in a Small Province" and "Thinking About Colin McCahon and Barnett Newman" were putting Peckham to use.<sup>13</sup> In "High Culture" and its autobiographical addendum "Doing Art Criticism in New Zealand", I read the activities of artists and viewers, and indeed of all those involved in the culture, in terms of highly structured conventionalised roles, seeing their outputs as codified texts. This played into my responses to post-object art and the changes through which my writing was going. For example, "The Reception", the first section of "Billy Apple in New Zealand", is a case study in "psychic insulation" or more particularly its absence, while the discussion of Bruce Barber's work in my *Project Programme* essay of 1975 is largely concerned with issues of role in his performances.<sup>14</sup> In this way I arrived at New Zealand post-object art equipped with Morse Peckham's theory, experience of the 1960s New York art scene and an attraction to the New American Poetry.

For me, my years in America were a time of taking issue with the New Criticism, the literary counterpart of the formalist modernism of Clement Greenberg – both still dominant for part of the 1960s but (though who was to know it?) on their last legs. Raymond Williams provided me with a tentative first alternative (Socialist, Arnoldian, English-style) but later I turned not only to Peckham but to linguistics (American-style), Russian formalism and Roman Jakobson, trying to construct the world out of what the University of Pennsylvania (Noam Chomsky was a recent graduate) had to offer, and what it didn't. I feel fortunate, for Peckham and the work one might do around him represented the American academic mind at its best, just before it was overtaken by continental theory in general and post-structuralism in particular.

On my bookshelf there's a Winter 1971 issue of the magazine *TriQuarterly*. It looks Warholish good with its silver cover and it's still a good read. Peckham's essay "The Virtues of Superficiality" is there, along with Edward Said's "Abecedarium Culturae: Structuralism, Absence, Writing",



an up-to-the-minute report on Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida (most not yet available in English). There's also an extract from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "The Prose of the World"; Tony Tanner on the fiction of John Hawkes; an Anne Mangel essay on Thomas Pynchon, Maxwell's demon, entropy and information; George Steiner on "Linguistics and Poetics". As this selection suggests, the work of the time (theirs, mine, ours) was on the move from minimal sculpture, late phenomenological philosophy and the New American poetry and fiction on the one hand, to the image-scavenging "simulationists", Continental post-structuralist "theory" and American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry on the other. Post-object or conceptual art and the poetics of criticism and literature belong between these two points and provide one of the paths that link them.

## II

This logic [operative in a great deal of the work of the 1970s] involves the reduction of the conventional sign to a trace, which then produces the need for a supplemental discourse.

— Rosalind Krauss<sup>15</sup>

The body's manipulation of things — or the identifiable extension of its work potentialities by simple technologies — intersected with actual space, time, and gravity to expand definitions for self-regulating and self-completing making systems. The strategy moved into a number of modalities, each of which played a variation on this structuralist theme of surrounding a given process with systematic developmental rules to produce self-completing making systems. This strongly phenomenological strategy of activities seeking natural limits, regulations and closures through the release of what was systematic in that alignment between the property of actions and the physical tendencies of a given media seemed to know neither rest nor fatigue, traversing as it did object art, process art, all kinds of documentations of nature and culture, and all kinds of performance, including music.

— Robert Morris<sup>16</sup>

WHAT I WROTE about Bruce Barber's *Mt Eden Crater Performance* of 25 June 1973, and published in *New Art*, differs crucially from any writing — not just art criticism — I'd done before: it was produced in situ. The decision not to be a passive viewer, not even just to take notes, but to perform the critic's role for an hour and a half of the performance's dawn-to-dusk duration was a considered one. But it would have unforeseen consequences for my future writing. Unlike the roles Barber assigned to the performers, my role seemed outside the work, being assigned not by the artist but by the art system. On the other hand, to a critic alert to the manners of the emerging genre of performance, performing criticism in situ seemed like fulfilling an instruction, albeit an implied one. A text produced under these circumstances was bound to be different. It was not so different, however, from the text I imagined might have been generated by another of Barber's performances, *Hill Body Tape Piece*, of a few months earlier:

Procedure: Speak as rolling down, roll while speaking

(1) recall events which took place prior to roll, speaking normally as possible

(2) events whilst roll is in progress, feelings, landscape, etc.

→ Bruce Barber *Mt Eden Crater Performance* (1973)





(3) anticipate events which may occur after roll performance  
Elements: recorder and tape loops, 3 mins. Or less  
100' lead and microphone  
Hill 50' slope  
Body

In this performance documentation and criticism converge.<sup>17</sup> And as criticism produced in situ begins to resemble performance, to participate in the structure of the work it is in the process of discovering, so the performance that produces its own documentation begins to resemble criticism. Hence Kosuth's "no middlemen needed". As we'll see, all the performers in *Mt Eden Crater Performance* were engaged in a comparable task of description. This convergence is a measure of the de-centring, centrifugal process enacted by one kind of 1970s performance. My text begins this way:

I'm sitting on the grass – have just sat myself down on the grass . . . on the South rim . . . this's the writer's site: on the grass, back to the road, face to Rangitoto and the whole Hauraki Gulf . . . Cover–cover . . . the filing with . . . pip, pip (electronic) . . . New York . . . great crater at my feet . . . beyond the North rim: cranes, the inner harbour, the North Shore and the islands are sharply outlined dark shapes . . . 10.25, Saturday morning, June 25, day following winter solstice . . . and so on . . . the pudding has? . . . cover–cover . . . sky a light blue, morning mist mostly dissipated by now leaving behind some low-lying cloud in the . . . the bowl carefully with, the bowl carefully with . . . the sun's warm, it's a good day . . . sky's light blue, grass green, the islands are dark shapes on a silver sea . . . which we learnt about in our own high-school civics class . . . steam the pudding for one hour – steam the pudding . . . two guys only about 10 feet away from me, I mean they're there suddenly and one of them – it's Geoff Steven – training a camera on me . . . and he's attached to the other by a heavy lead . . . so that's a portapack video-machine . . . he pans . . . then moves away to the right and along the rim . . . over bright green grass, the loose red volcanic earth . . . corkscrew (in a high-pitched scream) . . . corkscrew (again, high-pitched scream) . . . it's a long way down to the bottom of the crater and very steep . . . my position's precarious . . . a thumping roar of trains' traffic reaches me from the Eastern part of the city . . .<sup>18</sup>

Among the performers, four moved slowly round the rim of the crater. Miked up and carrying battery-powered megaphones, they read aloud and echoed phrases from texts each had chosen to stand for one of four "disciplines": sculpture, cooking, medicine and anthropology: Michael Shamberg's *Guerilla Television*, Liu Tsui Feng and Lin Hsiang Tu's *Secrets of Chinese Cooking*, Davies' *Clinical Psychiatry* and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. These texts, which are identified in the artist's documentation preceding my text in *New Art*, account for one of its disjunctive features. The run of my phrases describing the physical setting is occasionally broken by phrases about other things, like cooking. "Steam the pudding for one hour", for example, comes from Liu Tsui Feng and Lin Hsiang Tu. The dislocation is more apparent than real, in so far as these spoken phrases also belonged to the physical setting. My text's failure to distinguish between my written words and those uttered by the performers bespeaks an economy specific to the event. The text's dispersal – its broken off phrases – results from trying to keep up with or contain the situation.

More than that, these randomly registered, unacknowledged quotations themselves resemble traces as they close the circuit (a short circuit) of language opened by Barber's inclusion of texts in his performance, drawing the critic into a companionable loop of readers and writers. After the fact, my collage account enacts the relation of Barber's performance to language, to its function as a kind of conductor or contextualising occasion for remodelling culture as text. As we will see, my own subsequent texts serve as instances of such reorganising.

Writing about his work in *New Art*, Barber said, "This is a social activity, and I must act as if the 'performance' were socially effective. Although I may use the words 'performer' and 'audience' in reference to my work, I prefer to see these terms . . . exchanged for a notion of 'active' and 'passive' participation." Besides the four readers-out-loud, percussionists ranged around the crater's interior drumming throughout the performance, two video cameramen and their assistants spiralled down into and up out of the crater from opposite starting points, and finally a "Blind Master" and his guide equipped with microphone and tape recorder also spiralled into and out of the crater. While Geoff Steven, an official participant was "actively" recording me as a member of the viewing audience, I was "passively", which is to say "unofficially", recording him, recording me. Each of us had a bit part in the other's documentation. Each of us was a performer distinguished by roles either side of "the" performance. Some years later, in a catalogue text, a "complement/supplement" to his *Stocks and Bonds* performance, Barber elaborated on the provisional nature of this role distinction.

There is I feel a natural tendency for us to think while thinking and to shift from the role of audience to that of performer, from observing to doing; all of this takes place in the mind. We may complete not only the performances of others but also our own. It is unavoidably an act of observation and participation occurring simultaneously, with only subtle shifts of emphasis to distinguish one from the other.<sup>19</sup>

Barber called his performers "personae", perhaps thinking of "dramatis personae" in the theatre; people who take roles. Yet his personae are, with one exception, nameless, and they exist not to play characters so much as to carry out simple instructions. They have, and in a sense simply are, recording instruments; or, as Robert Morris put it, extensions and special amplifications of some part of the body's work by means of simple technologies. As important as their experiencing the crater is, it is subsumed by their responsibility for the task at hand. And the task is a shared one, a social one. The cast is divided into groups, each with a medium – the book, the drum, the video camera, the microphone – through which they interact with the site and each other. In so far as the individual consciousness of the artist/performer is dispersed into specified media, roles, groups, this is a distinctly de-centred work. Maybe these instruments were deployed in an effort to encompass the singular presence of this vast and elevated symmetrical landscape bowl; you could, as passers-by and tour buses did, come across *Mt Eden Crater Performance* and not notice it was there, so scattered and desultory was its presence on the site. The activity of the engaged viewer, the passive participant such as myself, was moved as much by the pathos of absence as by the force of presence. What were the readers reading over there? What exactly were



the cameras shooting? Or what specifically came to the attention of the Blind Master? It was hard to say. Assuredly answers would be forthcoming when all the documentation was brought together in a single installation, as eventually it was. But the result was hardly better than a multimedia extension and repetition of my own descriptive residue, and even more partial, fragmented and mediated than the performance proper.<sup>20</sup>

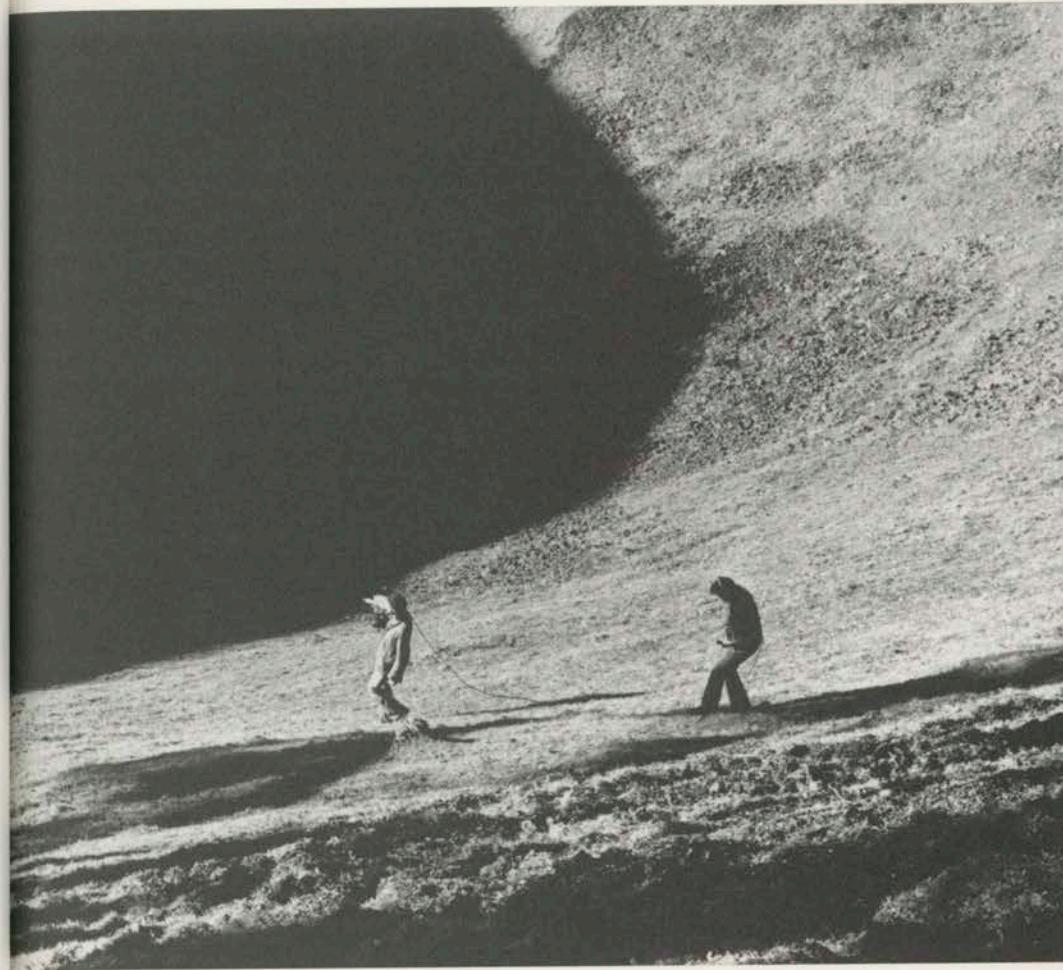
This de-centring is characteristic. 1970s Auckland performance focused on the structure and consciousness of the group rather than the individual. Kieran Lyons' *Superimpression* (1973), *Spring From the Cross* (1974) and *Welder's Weakness* (1975), Jim Allen's *Contact* (1974), Philip Dadson's *Purposeless Work* and *Earthworks* (1971), and all Scratch Orchestra and From Scratch pieces were characterised by "self-regulating, self-completing making systems" involving groups of performers assuming roles to engage simultaneously in various inter-subjective activities. It should be said that *Mt Eden Crater Performance* is a less than autonomous work. Starting in 1970, Dadson had already initiated *Solar Plexus*, his annual Winter Solstice dawn-to-dusk drumming event in the crater. Barber's performance, including a familiar complement of percussionists, was his contribution to a series which remained partially under Dadson's authorship. Barber became a foundation member of Dadson's small percussion group From Scratch, which appeared in public for the first time in 1974, performing its *Variable Occasion Music* (VOM) piece *Waxing and Waning Influences* at *Sonic Circus*. So Dadson's and Barber's projects at this time overlap not in the usual ways or for the usual reasons, but because each institutes hospitalities normally foreign to the performing arts.

For most of these artists the structure and consciousness of the group had social and political implications; questions of collectivity, power and social change were never far from their concerns. That is clear in Allen's *Contact*, Lyons' work, and Barber's *Stock and Bonds* for example. VOM went further than any of the other works mentioned, not so much identifying as modelling some of the political implications of these group performances. Dadson has written that *Waxing and Waning Influences*:

... retains the thread of anarchy present in most of the Scratch Orchestra stuff. More than any other this piece was a vehicle for individual personalities to emerge out of the group. Geoff Chapple was the major waxing influence. Built into the structure, largely formulated by Geoff, was the role of the revolutionary soloist, a declamatory role where ideas and language emerged out of the drumming – a sort of theatre of dialectics where provocative ideas and actions were projected out of the music-making and back into it, effecting salient changes of mood and music.<sup>21</sup>

In 1974 Chapple and Dadson described the situation of the revolutionary soloist in relation to the waxing and waning activities of the group in these terms:

If a player feels a particular waxing influence unsuited to his needs, but recognises also the influence has reached the point where it will be the dominant waxing influence he may attempt to draw the other players away. Initially he will draw attention to himself by using any or all of the sound sources, different from the sound source still waxing behind him, and on a single rhythm



Bruce Barber *Mt Eden Crater Performance* (1973)





From Scratch *Variable Occasion Music* (1974) performance at Sonic Circus, Victoria University of Wellington. Participants from left to right: Barry Barquay, Philip Dadson, Geoff Chapple, Bruce Barber

selected from any of the rhythms within the four phases, with the exception of the rhythm now waxing behind him. At this point the other drummers will decide if they will go over to the new suggested influence. If they continue with the waxing influence they were playing before the advent of the soloist, the soloist must fall back to their waxing influence or fall silent. If the players decide to go over to the soloist's new suggested influence, they should go over quickly, and the soloist's suggested influence then becomes the new waxing influence.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever the particular implications, however, it is important to recognise that they arise from some common terms specific to performance that condition the kind of politics made possible by this sort of work.

That published post-object criticism sometimes takes the form of a taped group discussion – the group commonly including the artist and other post-object artists – suggests a common impulse not unrelated to the de-centred and dialogic tendencies of the works. Here the accounts of Barber's *Bucket Action* (1973) and Allen's *O-AR* (1975) are exemplary. Blair French is correct in sourcing these to the art school "crit. sessions" introduced by Jim Allen in 1969, and in suggesting that they shared "certain foundational principles . . . with critical models of both art and criticism."<sup>23</sup> *O-AR: Part I* was an installation in which writing, as with the texts in *Mt Eden Crater Performance*, played back and forth across the frame of the work. Texts were pinned to the walls of the gallery and some, like that which follows, were reproduced in the catalogue:

of the flesh, much as; that I detected in all; a month, therefore the enigma; to help in shouldering a portable: since infancy. They were simply-looking: of the blue and absolute: one moment struck: constantly shifting, a strange: at a point Where there: were identical. That moment for: long as an equal stress: identical intoxication: all alike than differences: factor to an absolute: that vision, my eyes: blue sky that, like: down and soared: of tragedy, the tragic: sensibility momentarily: nobility finds its basis: in the tragic are born: to the divine, then under: this-sight, I understood: the idea of some particular; of the dualism of: the spirit and come: own se

Allen's semi-colons resemble the ellipses that separate the fragments of my *Mt Eden Crater Performance* text. His language has also come to bits, but its hybridity issues from the exigencies of installation, of space, rather than of performance or time. It is as though Allen had repeatedly dipped in and out of some text – to pick up the metaphor of his title – collecting four or five words at a time. Most of the catalogue is, however, taken up with the transcript of an extended discussion of the work involving Bruce Barber, John Lethbridge, David Harre, Billy Apple, myself and Jim Allen. On the title page, underneath a list of these names, appeared the following statement by the artist:



There is a possibility that some if not all of this material may be included in the catalogue to be produced following the art gallery exhibition. You may wish to delete, correct, summarise, add a particular or general comment to your previous statement. Please correct the text and use the blank page opposite for comments.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, this is directed not to the reader but the discussion participants. But its inclusion serves like a set of instructions to performers following a rehearsal. It is as though the discursive function of the catalogue was being reframed in performance terms. Much of the discussion is concerned with the meaning and function of the wall texts, and while it is all rather earnest and heavy-going at times, the intensity of the attention to and the enactment of the link between text and context, between writing performed inside the work (writing as art) and performed outside the text (writing as criticism), is remarkable, a kind of demonstration.<sup>25</sup>

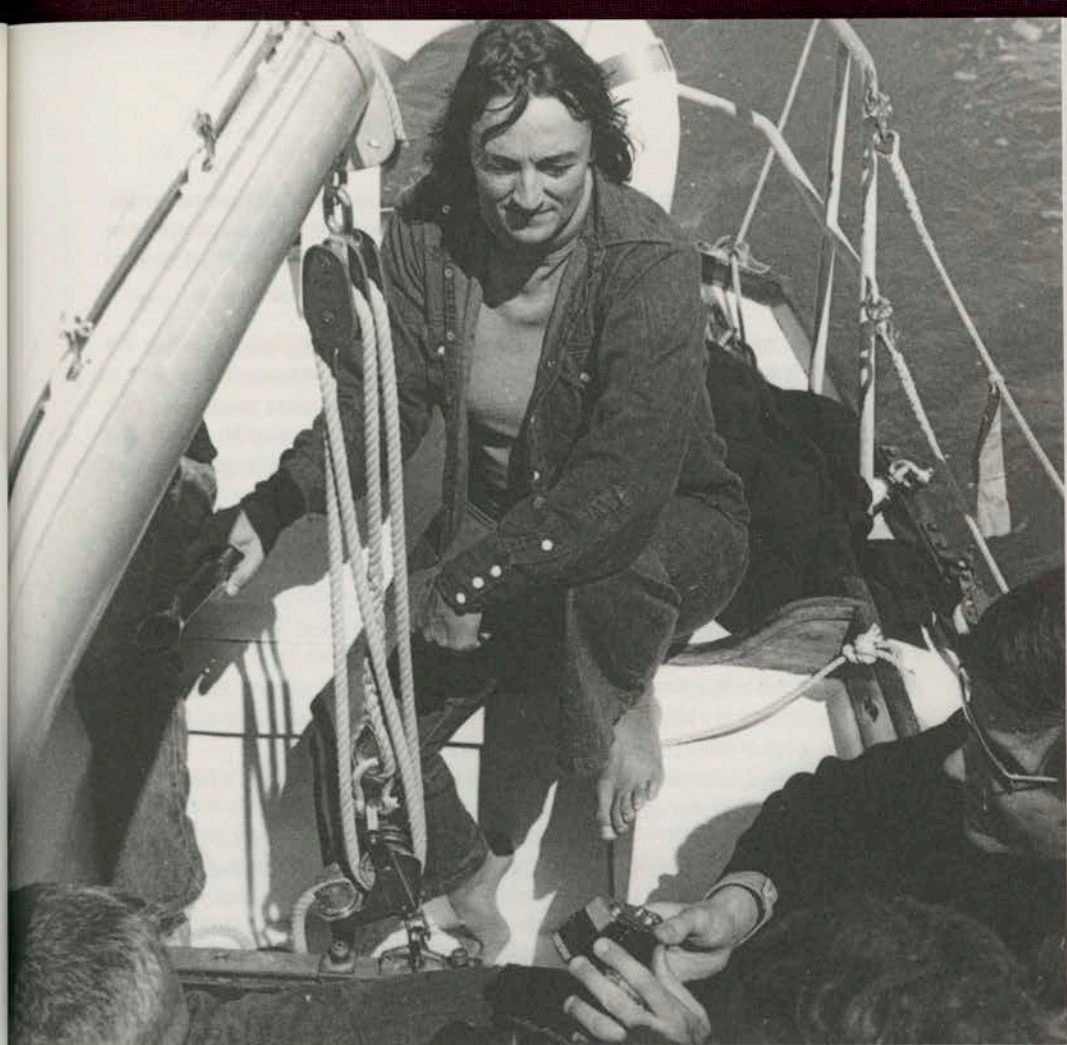
### III

IN THE EARLY 1980s, I adapted the approach I used for Barber's *Mt Eden Crater Performance* in writing about Peter Roche and Linda Buis' performances. Although not produced literally in situ, these accounts were written up as soon as possible afterwards, sometimes the same day. Roche, it turned out, was doing the same, and when we discovered this we decided to swap notes. This continued for three years, and some of these tandem commentaries were later published.<sup>26</sup> Before then I had already put in situ writing to other uses. In October 1974, Jim Allen offered to take Bruce Barber and I, Mel Bochner and Lucy Lippard (two New Yorkers in Auckland with the MoMA exhibition *Some Recent American Art*) sailing. We took his yacht to Rangitoto island and walked to the summit. I took a notebook, and when we reached the top I began writing:

Lucy, Pam and Bruce'd made it ahead of us, are stretched out on top of the old concrete bunker next to the trig station, about 3 I'd say. All the way up to 56th St. (that's Mel). Pair of painted ladies come jiving up from the manuka scrub. This here is: sky, there's Brown's Island (another volcano), east of it: Waiheke Island, squalls raking it. Tugged it out of my hip pocket, find some space between Wordsworth's letters and the trip to Sydney, start writing – from memory to begin with: Lucy, Pam and Bruce'd made it etc – fast, fast. Didn't know you could ride a bicycle up. Still Mel, flopped supine, head back on my jacket, and his sweater. From the sea it's 3 miles across rocks, 654ft. up. Talking now.<sup>27</sup>

Later, typing up the text – a continuation of the writing process – I organised it into a sequence of paragraphs, each paragraph was longer by one unit than the one that preceded, so that it took a spiral form. Three years later I was in New York and took my notebook to an opening at the Guggenheim with the express purpose of producing a companion piece that would echo the spiral form of its galleries.

→ Rangitoto boat trip (1975); top, Lucy Lippard and Mel Bochner; lower left, Jim Allen and Adrian Hall; lower right, Bruce Barber and Lucy Lippard. Photos: Pam Allen





An opening. To what? 5th floor elevator door slides back: Acquisition Priorities: Aspects of Post-War Painting in America. For god's sakes, Henry! This tall, elegant, elderly, blacktied up against me. Pink chin, white hair, moustache. To whom? This short, I should say, "rotund" one in front of me twists back. Florid face, glasses (rimless), full grey beard . . .<sup>28</sup>

The two pieces were later published side by side as "Climbing Rangitoto/Descending the Guggenheim" in the *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*.<sup>29</sup> You could read across from piece to piece, as well as down through each. In both, the units grew in length to echo a progress of ascent or descent. These spiral forms link the piece to Barber's instructions for *Mt Eden Crater Performance*, as does the volcanic site. The writing is also similar; descriptive fragments, broken up by snatches of reported speech — "For god's sakes, Henry!"

Strictly speaking not art criticism, these pieces are nevertheless a kind of art journalism. In content, occasion and style they were not markedly different from and perhaps led to a series of four "Art Places" columns written for *Art New Zealand* between 1977 and 1979. While I was in New York I gave a reading at the Franklin Furnace Archive of a long piece called "On Volcanoes". While it makes passing references to Bruce Barber and Kieran Lyons, the piece has nothing to do with the art world, more with volcanoes and the history of the Pacific. This progress from a kind of performance criticism to a kind of writing that is its own occasion matches, as I gradually came to recognise, a line of development within contemporary American writing.

Jack Kerouac, a writer distinguished, says Clark Coolidge, not so much by a style as by a practice, is a key pioneer of in situ writing. He called it "sketching".

Sketching (Ed White casually mentioned it in 124th Chinese restaurant near Columbia. "Why don't you sketch in the street like a painter but with words?") which I did . . . everything activates in front of you in myriad profusion, you just have to purify your mind and let it pour the words . . . It's the only way to write . . . Sometimes it is embarrassing to write in the street or anywhere outside but it's absolute . . . it never fails, it's the thing itself, natch.<sup>30</sup>

In 1981, in San Francisco, I discovered post-object writing or Language writing, as it is now generally known. One of the poets at that Intersection reading was Ron Silliman who read from a work called "Skies". Apparently a work-in-progress, this was the procedure: each morning Silliman got up and wrote a sentence about the sky, or with the sky in it. His poem "BART" (short for Bay Area Rapid Transport) was written in situ, 9 September 1976. It begins:

Begin going down. Embarcadero, into the ground, earth's surface, escalators down, a world of tile, fluorescent lights, is this the right ticket, labor day, day free of labor, trains, a man is asking is there anything to see, Glen Park, Daly City, I'm going South which in my head means down but I'm going forward, she says he should turn around, off at Powell, see Union Square, see Chinatown . . . is this the right ticket, carpet of the car is yellow, orange, green, red, blue, woven in also, going faster now, lights flicker out the windows, dark there, not flicker but we pass them so quickly . . .<sup>31</sup>

It continues in this fashion for another 22 pages tracing a five hour journey on the system, and ends with his return to Embarcadero.<sup>32</sup> Clearly "On Volcanoes" is not art criticism, but neither is

it poetry — I call such writings "proses". For "The Snips of Castor Bay" I took a notebook to the beach throughout the summer of 1973–4, not just to Castor Bay but the many local North Shore beaches we liked to visit in turn — Castor Bay, Campbell's, Milford, Takapuna, Murray's, Brown's. I swam, wrote, sunbathed, and wrote, sunbathed and swam:

Sea's warm still . . . a wind which cools the skin, blows the sky chalk blue-clouds are building up on the horizon and behind Rangitoto crinkles the sea greens and silvers . . . grey sand cool underfoot . . . taking these green hints: uterine, Mesozoic . . . fleshly caresses hold my breath . . . for recollection . . . and then for the Gulf . . . the sun sets, leaving the clear sky flush with it . . . into deeper, darker water . . . cumulus brighten the bay . . . that's be it, there under the poplars, with the watermelon-red roof . . . lungs getting away with it . . . wet rocks, white froth . . . being airtight's something . . . where the light gets in . . . well how about this here: somersaulting out of the tide, serendipity-do-dah-day . . . in whale space . . . ravel these ambiances . . . beyond the shelf: trenches, troughs great basins and plateaux . . . bits of giggles bubble up . . . tore down the beach and throw myself bodily into the first wave that . . . ridges, trough, slopes and plateaux — biggest landscape in the whole world! . . . when in the belly frenzy find wings and . . .<sup>33</sup>

At the same time I collected real estate advertisements — the other "snips" — from the local paper, and a selection of them provided the text with a second voice:

A CASTOR BAY MINI MANSION. \$55,000. Magnificent tree and sea views, 2400ft of tasteful luxury with a high degree of privacy. Billiard room, 3 brms, and study, huge lounge, sep. dining, 2 car plus boat garaging. Shag-pile carpeting throughout, extensive wrought iron light fittings in every room. Not only outstanding value but a vendor who will negotiate still further.

Just as this is a portrait of a North Shore beach, Silliman's 1988 book length poem *What is a* portrait of San Francisco composed largely of the observations that can be made of it by one who walks its streets on a daily basis.

. . . Here  
the road climbs the canyon wall  
so that as we travel  
homes appear to descend.  
. . . She jogs  
holding a Walkman in one hand.  
The poetry of the past recedes  
like the memory of a  
childhood dentist. Blue-rimmed  
plastic see-through scarf,  
beneath which white hair  
is contained by a net.  
or this man with a rain cover  
pulled over a fedora. Platitude  
of the past aghast. A pen  
Clipped into her rear



(tight levis) pocket. Glazed over  
like the eyes of the blind.  
In the ambulance, the IV  
Is automatic (sack of salted  
Sugar water): to provide a track  
In the event of medication.  
The Museum of Unnatural History.  
Porch light on all night . . .<sup>34</sup>

In the 1960s I began publishing short fiction, but I soon lost interest in both fiction and poetry much as artists lost interest in painting and sculpture in these years. Genre lost its neutrality, seemed part of the question of what to write rather than of the answer to it. One reason I warmed to Silliman's work then was that it was a way of writing outside of genre. Further, it differed from Kerouac's, which had sought various accommodations with fiction, by forming itself according to various self-completing making-systems (procedures) familiar from contemporary art practice. Silliman used either a task-based procedure (like Barber's *Hill Body Tape Piece*, my *Mt Eden* text, or his "BART" piece), or some predetermined numerical schema, such as the Fibonacci series he used in the "novel" *Tjanting* (like the simple spiral progression I used for "Climbing Rangitoto . . ." or the golden ratio in my collaborations with Billy Apple).

Distinctions between poetry and prose, poetry and criticism, were under attack in 1970s Language writing. The magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978–82) which gives the tendency its name, was unusually a journal of criticism. In San Francisco Bob Perelman "curated" a series of poets' "talks" which became conversations usually at the end but sometimes also along the way, edited and collected 37 of them in two volumes. Collaborative writing was also a feature: *Legend* (1980) was written by Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman. It comprised 26 sections – five with one author, one with two, and 11 with three.

The work explodes the presumption of authorship, dismantling and reconfiguring it in a series of multi-authored sections, each determined by the capacity of different techniques to generate new meaning – in what seems not just an experimental but almost a scientific approach to writing, as it recombines pre-given or improvised materials and subjects them to processes of formal construction, to see what happens next.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV

They were paintings which were not paintings; objects which were not objects – they were experiential. You could walk through them, or not. What really kicked me off was Le Courbusier's book *The Modulor*, his concern to design architectural spaces around the proportions and movements of the body . . . Later on the writings of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty were important.

– Adrian Hall describing his sculptures of the 1960s.<sup>36</sup>

Writing as a map for the reader to read into, to interpolate from the space of the page out onto a projected field of "thinking" . . . this conceptualisation could allow for indeterminate possibilities for the final construction of meaning, as theorised by Robert Morris in respect to his minimal sculpture of the later sixties . . .

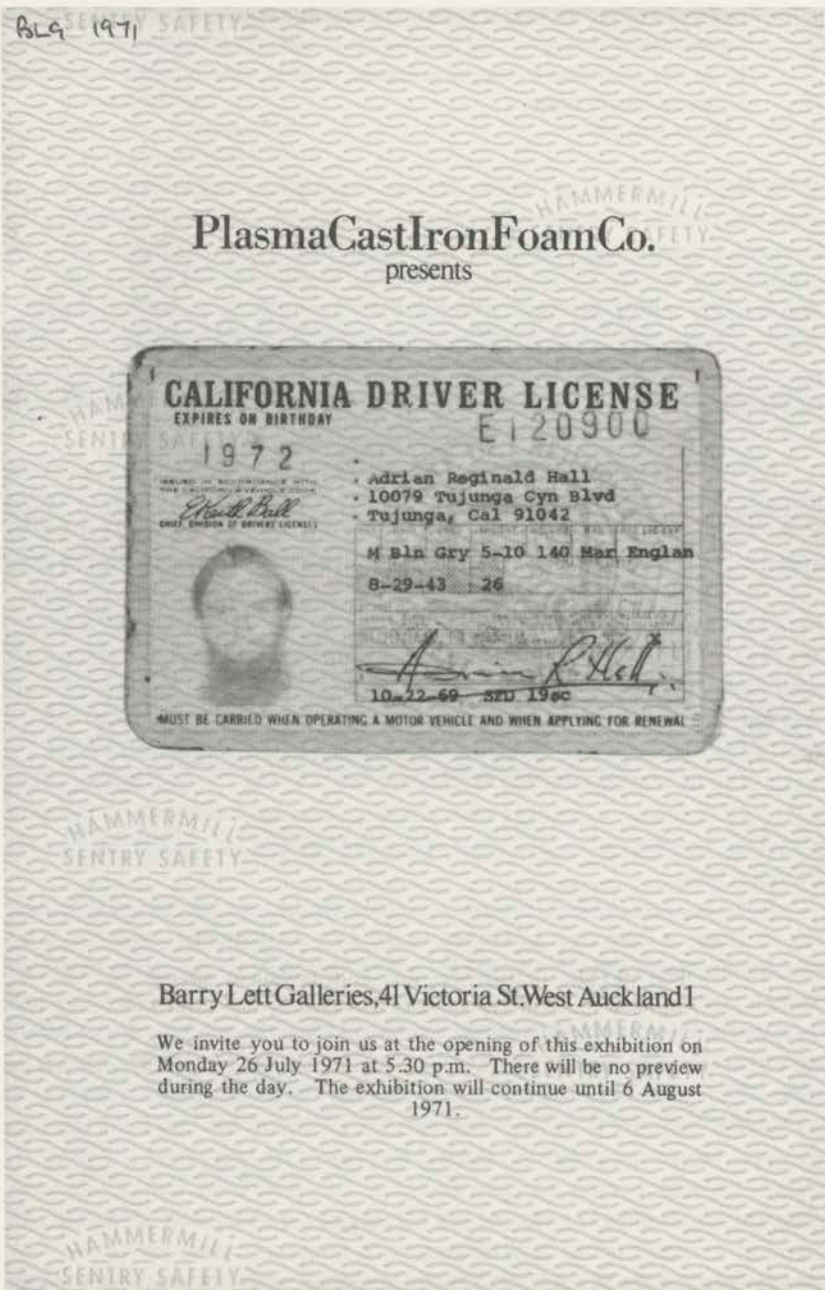
– Charles Bernstein<sup>37</sup>

AT THE TIME I felt confident, as I do now, that I was engaged in an ongoing critical project, one whose contradictions and problems were integral to its framework. Back then, I could not give that framework a name. It wasn't Marxist for sure. Today I'd call it phenomenological. But a late phenomenology, best represented philosophically by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945; in English, 1962) through to *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964; in English, 1968) especially. His essay "Eye and Mind" (in English, 1960) was read by many artists and critics in the later 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>38</sup> And while it is convenient to begin the post-object story with minimalism as a kind of wayward reprise of formalist abstraction, it is more informative and indicative to link them and minimalism to phenomenology.

Robert Morris described the minimalist work not as an autonomous object but as a "map for the reader": "The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some ways more reflexive, because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships." It is sculpture which constructs a phenomenological viewer: "One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context . . . The object itself has not become less important. It has merely become less *self-important*."<sup>39</sup> Or, in Merleau-Ponty's words: "this is a viewer with a body that is both "Visible and mobile, [a] body [that is] a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing . . . vision happens among, or is caught in, things – in that place where something visible undertakes to see."<sup>40</sup> The upshot is a subject, incomplete within itself, whose existence and meaning can only manifest itself with the field of vision.

Morris' sculpture *Untitled* (1965) was included in *Some Recent American Art* at Auckland City Art Gallery in 1974. Four polyhedrons formed a truncated pyramid penetrated by two intersecting passages. Although the viewer has to think twice before entering, having done so and having occupied the centre of the work, they realise that *work* and *viewer* have exchanged places: the space that previously ranged around the object is now occupied by it, and the space previously occupied by the object has been offered to the viewer. The specific arrangement – the way the shape and size of the polyhedrons are scaled to the viewer's body – serves to delay and heighten the temporal experience of the work. They raise the question of how perspective structures perception, because the polyhedrons, observed from outside the arrangement, are ambiguous shapes – they might be cubes or irregular polyhedrons. Once in the centre, however, once having exchanged side elevations for a bird's eye view and swapped subject/object viewing positions, the gestalt of a pyramid, whose projected pinnacle is immediately above the viewer's head, temporarily resolves the ambiguity that activated the position outside the arrangement. *Untitled*





is a model of a de-centred artwork designed to demonstrate a space in which subject/object distinctions do not hold.<sup>41</sup>

Mel Bochner, whose *Principle of Detachment (Auckland Version)* (1973) was in the same show, is a post-object artist who also thought of the art object phenomenologically:

Would anything change if sensible things were conceived as "across" space, rather than "in" space? First, objects would cease to be the locus of sight. Then, no longer centers in themselves, they would demand to be perceived as the organizations by everything around them . . . That which common sense has always presented as a unity (objects) become only the negatives in a field of determinants . . . Profiled in this way, matter surrenders its obstinate chunkiness to reveal only a position in a cross section of orientations and levels . . .<sup>42</sup>

The abstractness and resolute indexicality of the minimalist object, its resistance to iconic and conventional codes, amounts to a resistance to language, indeed to the semiotic. Philosophically, structuralism's eclipsing phenomenology is partly a result of this resistance.<sup>43</sup> New Zealand post-object art, as I have already shown is not so resistant.

Jim Allen met Adrian Hall at Yale University, New Haven, where Morris and Donald Judd were regular visitors, and subsequently invited him to teach in Auckland. Hall's first exhibition here was entitled *Plasma Cast Iron Foam Co. Presents Adrian Reginald Hall*. Some of the works, such as *Low Tide* and *Silent Wall*, assumed an ambiguous, even parodic relation to minimalism. Minimalism's analyses of perception necessarily encompassed the physical conditions for perception, and from this there followed critique of, or in Hall's case a satire on, exhibition conventions (opening night attendants wore T-shirts bearing the silly fictional company logo), and the art object's commodity status (wooden blocks rubber-stamped with Hall's signature were sold for 50c). The "cross-sections of orientations and levels" in Hall's show are not minimal in so far as they are semiotically complex, but they remain phenomenological.

The exhibition was influential, with its particular cross-sectioning showing up in Roger Peters' *Songs of the Earth*, and its pointed playfulness in Mike Bajko's playful take offs of Carl André and Constantin Brancusi.<sup>44</sup> As indicated by the exhibition title, self-portraiture was at the heart of Hall's show. *Life Size* and *Pyramid* were the artist's height. Hall's immediate past life was represented by *Cheque Piece*, comprising two years of his cancelled cheques. Hall constructed his portrait mostly from the building materials and techniques of his new country, as if making himself a(t) home here: Gib board, bricks, concrete foundation blocks, plywood, plumb lines. *Low Tide* and *Plumb Rite* represented Hall as an artist under construction, inseparable from local materials and the architecture of the gallery.

From 1975 to 1980 Billy Apple's work became increasingly pre-occupied with a critique of the givens of gallery spaces. The works of his 1975 New Zealand tour, such as *8 x 8*, address the physical conditions of the viewing space. If it was not entirely clear from these works whether Apple was just shoring up the white cube space of modernism or using that as an alibi for the installation of a post-object field of vision, his interventions in gallery space during his

← Adrian Hall *Plasma Cast Iron Foam Co. Presents Adrian Reginald Hall* (1971) catalogue cover



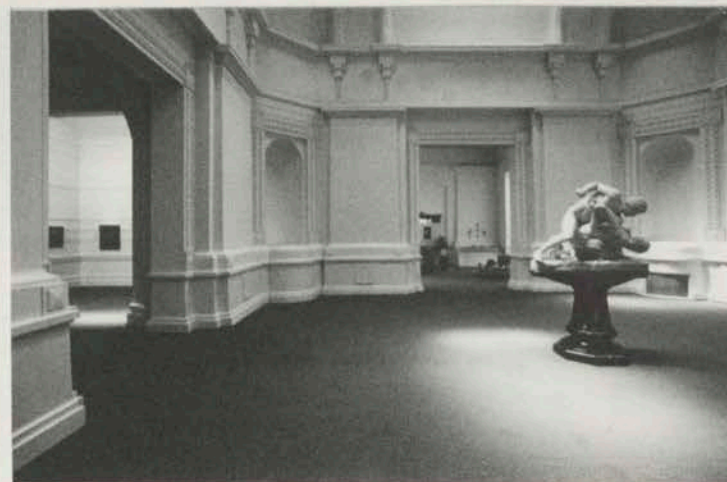
1979–80 tour were unambiguous. In *Towards the Centre* at Wanganui's Sarjeant Gallery, he replaced the permanently installed sculpture *The Wrestlers* with a social history of its place in the gallery. He substantially altered and proposed accessioning the main staircase of New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Exposing and documenting the interior modernisations of Auckland's public gallery spaces enabled viewers to read the materials of which they were made as intrusive messages with which every temporary exhibit had to contend.

Phenomenological space proposes a kind of attention and manner of writing that privileges description. Hugh J. Silverman writes: "Description is the project of approximating what is to be understood without altering it. Description is clarification, illumination, making visible . . . [the] demand is: tell me how it is, but don't touch it."<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology suggests that perception is not divided up, but that we divide it by specific cognitive acts. Description must survey and inventory perception as we experience it and as it is. The phenomenologist with his description must, above all, realise that he too perceives and that his description is hardly separate from the perception he describes . . . perception does not manifest itself as the meanings which come from inside, nor does it come from the outside, the thing perceived, for the perceived and the perceiving both partake of the same activity and are indistinguishable in perception itself.<sup>46</sup>

My discussion of *Mt Eden Performance*, and all the texts of mine that seem to follow from it, are resolutely descriptive. They are at once closely observant of the object of perception and activated by the subject of perception. The activity of writing occurs too close to the end of the pen for it to be autobiographical, or self-concerned. Language poet Lyn Hejinian writes of a poetics of description which does not offer "an after-the-fact-realism", but which engages the activity of writing. A kind of description which embodies the processes of "invention and composition. Description . . . is a particular and complicated process of thinking, because it is simultaneous with and equivalent to perception, remaining open to arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears."<sup>47</sup>

To literally put words into Merleau-Ponty's mouth:  
 The thickness of writing between  
 The reader and the poem is constitutive for the poem  
 Of its visibility & for the reader  
 Of the outer limit of his or her absorption  
 In the poem; it is not an obstacle  
 Between them, it is their means  
 Of communication. The thickness of writing,  
 Far from rivalling that of the world,  
 Is on the contrary the sole  
 Means it has to go to the heart of things  
 By making itself part  
 Of the material, absorbed  
 By it.<sup>48</sup>

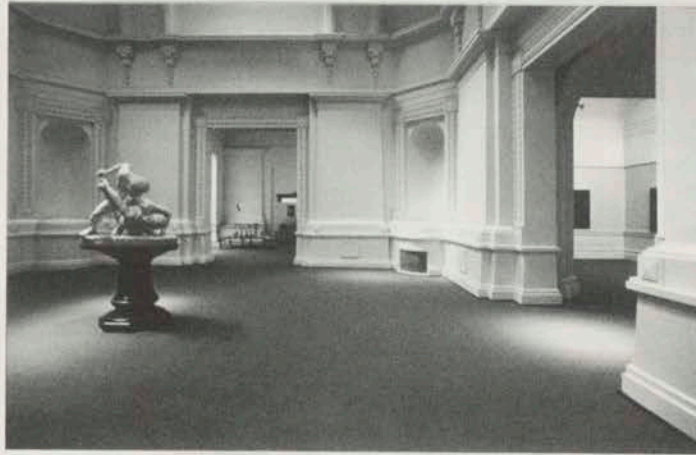
→ Facing page and following page: Billy Apple, from *Towards the Centre* (1980) photo-text panel; collection of Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui



### 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 little 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.





### 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 given 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 bounded, cut up, divided, systematized, ordered or organised 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*

Charles Bernstein's literal translation of Merleau-Ponty's terms for the situation of perception/description into those of the reading situation entails a restoration of language and the semiotic. He adopts the word

... *flesh*

as Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses this term  
to designate the intersection of the visible  
& the invisible

But discovers in the process that the roles of the visible and the invisible in the two situations have been reversed.

for it is the invisible of writing  
that is imagined to be absorbed  
while the visible of writing usually goes on unheard  
or is silenced. The visibility of words  
as a precondition of reading  
necessitates that words obtrude impermeably into the world — this  
impermeability makes a reader's absorption  
in words possible. The *thickness*  
of words ensures that whatever  
of their physicality is erased, or engulfed, in  
the process of semantic projection,  
a residue  
tenaciously in-  
heres that will not be sublimated  
away.<sup>23</sup>

Wystan Curnow



1. It is hard to overstate *Artforum's* importance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Elam Library copied some of my back issues to backfill their holdings. But it wasn't just in New Zealand that the magazine's superiority was impossible to avoid. Yves-Alain Bois says it was the same for the French. See his "Introduction: Resisting Blackmail" *Painting as Model* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990. pp xv-xvii. See also Thomas Crow "The Graying of Criticism" *Artforum* September 1993. pp185, 187, 189.
2. John Lethbridge said in an interview not long after he had moved from Auckland to Sydney that he had returned to art school, to Elam, as a postgraduate "because I was starved of communication . . . I got so much into critical discussion about works and about working and the work I was doing that I physically couldn't talk about anything else. But now I miss that intense dialogue situation that was set up there." *Conversations with Australian Artists* (ed. Geoffrey de Groen) Quartet Books, Melbourne, 1978. p75.
3. Heinemann, Auckland, 1976.
4. Joseph Kosuth "Statement from Information" *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966-1990* (ed. Gabriele Guercio) M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991. p73.
5. "The invention of a critical project - a contemporary art criticism in New Zealand - whether perceived as supplementing or emerging from within post-object at this time is another important history yet to be fully explicated. There is little doubt that if not post-object work itself then certainly the cultural and intellectual conditions from which it emerged also gave occasion for the beginnings of other various language-based critical projects, from art criticism to phenomenological texts, to American language-poetry inflected writings of the early 1980s. Significantly all appeared together under the same publishing banners in magazines such as *And*, *Parallax*, *Splash* and *Spleen*." Blair French "Jim Allen: From Elam to the Experimental Art Foundation" *Intervention: Post Object Art and Performance in New Zealand in the 1970s and Beyond* Robert MacDougall Art Gallery and Annex, Christchurch, 2000. p45.
6. "Billy Apple in New Zealand" *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 61 May 1976. p16.
7. Red Mole Enterprises put out eight issues of *Spleen* between 1975 and 1977. Issue 2 carried ads for Bruce Barber's performance *Stocks and Bonds* at Auckland City Art Gallery, and the national reading tour of leading "New American" poet, Robert Creeley. Issue 7 included a Tony Green Allen Maddox review, as strange as any criticism written here before or since.
8. See the "Lush Tape" *Spleen* 2 (1975), featuring Jim Allen, Billy and Jacki Apple, Peter Crowe and Bruce and Pauline Barber; and the discussion of *Bucket Action*, featuring Kieran Lyons, Bruce Barber, Guy von Sturmer and Jim Allen in *New Art* op cit. both np.
9. "Necessary Protection" *McCahon's Necessary Protection* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1977. pp4-12.
10. I would not emphasise this per se as a poet's position, but one specific to these poets and to writers and artists who share their orientation. As Merleau-Ponty explained: "Philosophy must enter the fray. The practice of theory must itself be non-philosophy, i.e. philosophy that has become experience and action." (cited in Hugh J. Silverman *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York, 1987. p147.) While the house styles of established art magazines generally disregarded these negotiations, more artist-based periodicals of the time like *Avalanche* were very actively engaged.
11. Schocken Books, New York, 1965.
12. *Artforum* April 1970. p73.
13. "High Culture in a Small Province" *Essays on New Zealand Literature* Heinemann, Auckland, 1973. pp155-71; "Thinking About Colin McCahon and Barnett Newman" *Art New Zealand* 8 November/December/January 1977-8. pp48-52. "Doing Art Criticism in New Zealand" *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* Vol 3, 1975. pp11-8.
14. "Billy Apple in New Zealand" op cit. pp10-6. "Project Programme 1975: Nos. 1-6" *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 62/3 December 1976. pp19-22.
15. "Notes on the Index: Part 2" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986. p211.
16. "Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide" *Artforum* February 1973.
17. Barber's piece relates to various Vito Acconci pieces like *Drifts* (November 1970), nine photographs recording the artist rolling down a sandhill, or, more interestingly, to a number of Acconci's contemporary performances in which the artist's action and his own photographic documentation are simultaneous: "Snap shutter as I hit ground."
18. *New Art* op cit. np.
19. Bruce Barber *On the Stocks* Auckland City Art Gallery, 1975. np.
20. "In many senses what such writing does is pressure the very conception of the work as anterior to its presence in both concurrent and subsequent textual, and/or linguistic reflection." Blair French "Critical Forms: The Wake of Conceptualism" unpublished paper, presented at the *Colloquium* conference, Christchurch, 1999.
21. Cited in Sarah Shieff and Wylan Curnow "From Scratch: 273 Moons: A History, the Music, and an Interview" *Music New Zealand* 30 1995. p33.
22. Philip Dadson and Don McGlashan *The From Scratch Rhythm Book* Heinemann, Auckland, 1990. p57.
23. Blair French "Critical Forms" op cit.
24. *O-AR: Jim Allen Recent Work* Auckland City Art Gallery, 1975. np.
25. See Blair French "Critical Forms" op cit, for a recent account of the role of text to the installation.
26. "Peter Roche/Linda Buis: A Gathering Concerning Three Performances" *Parallax* Vol 1, No 2, 1983. pp166-87.
27. Lucy Lippard, Pam Allen and Bruce Barber.
28. Henry Geldzahler.
29. "Climbing Rangitoto / Descending The Guggenheim" *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* Vol 7, 1979. pp15-9.
30. Clark Coolidge *Now it's Jazz: Writings on Kerouac and The Sounds* Living Batch Press, Albuquerque, 1999.
31. *BART* Potes & Poets Press, Los Angeles, 1982. np.
32. Reference should be made to Roger Horrocks *The Auckland Regional Transit Poetry Line* Hawk Press, Auckland, 1982. The opening page "Monday Morning" concludes: "I'm prepared for a week to talk only with myself using a new exercise book and pen (Wild Blue purchased last Friday from Mags and Fags in Victoria Street near the bus stop and an Adult Concession card a strict poetic form printed on cardboard in two rows of five seats headed east or west into the sun. / Here at the point of a turning world in an exercise book in the beginning on an 8 o'clock bus in Auckland on a November morning in 1978." Each page is devoted to one of the 10 trips which make up a week's commuter travel.
33. *New Argot* March 1975. p13.
34. Ron Silliman *What The Figures*, Great Barrington, 1988. pp31-2.
35. Barrett Watten "The Secret History of the Equal Signs: L=A=N=G=U=A=M=G=E Between Discourse and Text" *Poetics Today* Vol 20, No 4; Winter 1999. In the section "Legend's Social Formation" Watten provides a close analysis of the book's attempt to establish an intersubjective discourse. pp597-622.
36. Adrian Hall interviewed by Wylan Curnow and Robert Leonard "Bricks in Aspice" *Art New Zealand* 90 Autumn 1999. p35.
37. "Writing and Method" *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* Sun and Moon Press 1986. pp234-5.
38. Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* Routledge, New York, 1962; *The Visible and the Invisible* (ed. Claude Lefort; trans. Alfonso Lingis) Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968. Rosalind Krauss reads Richard Serra's *Shift* through Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in "Richard Serra: A Translation" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985. pp261-74. See also the exchanges involving Krauss, Michael Fried and Benjamin Buchloch in "Theories of Art After Minimalism and Pop" *Discussions in Contemporary Culture: Volume 1* (ed. Hal Foster) Bay Press, Seattle, 1987. pp71-87.
39. "Notes on Sculpture: Part 2" *Continuous Project Altered Daily* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975. pp15-7.
40. "Eye and Mind" *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (ed. John O'Neill) Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1974. p284.

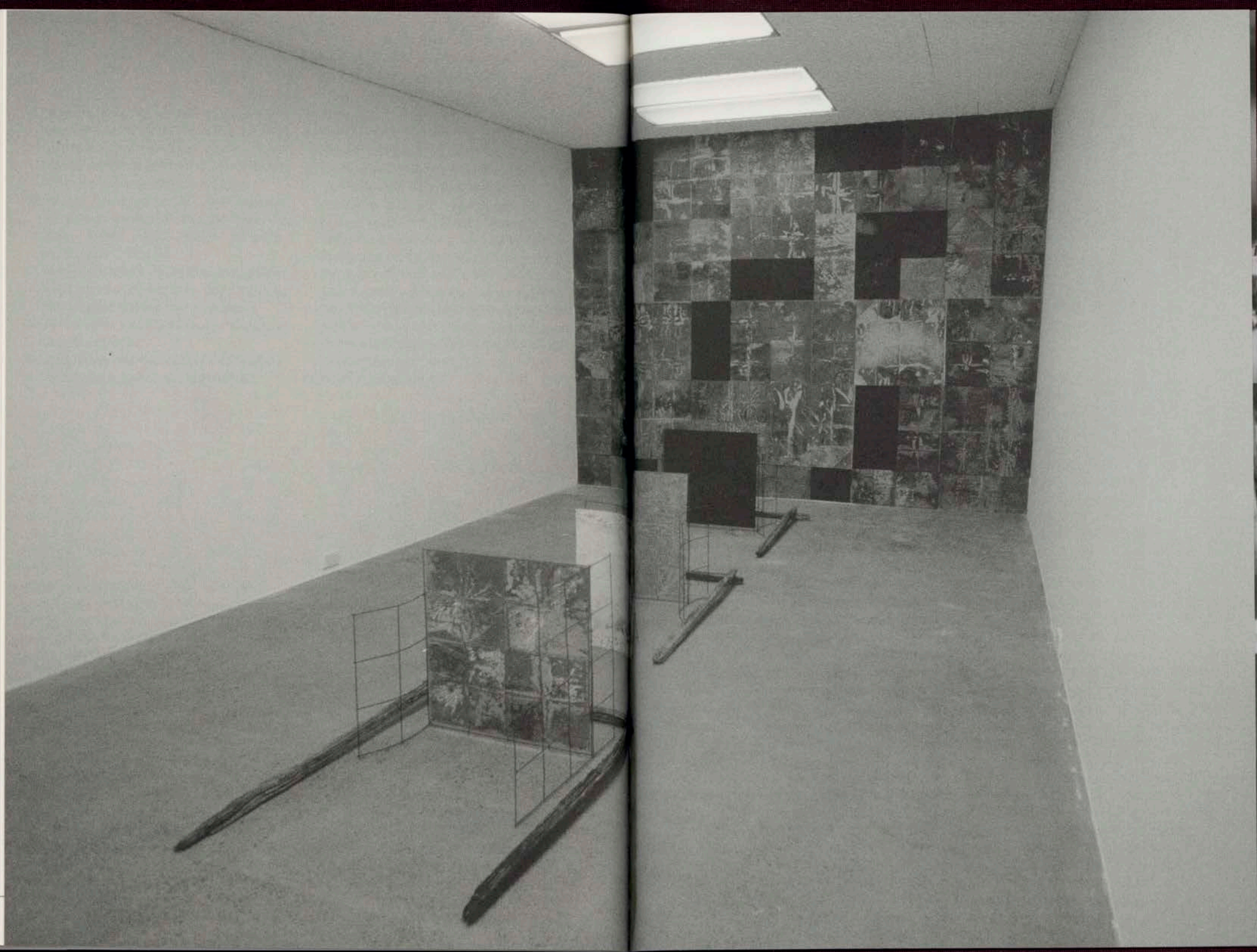


41. Of course, these are not the first installations which claim to change the viewer from a passive observer to an active participant. The very different "environments" of artists like Alan Kaprow in the USA or kinetic groups like GRAV in Paris are earlier.
42. "Excerpts from Speculation: 1967–1970" *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson) M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999. p195.
43. Bochner's description of sensible things as negatives in a field of determinants may be an attempt to give the phenomenological space a structuralist gloss.
44. *Endless Column* and *Lever* are parodied in stacks of steak-and-kidney pies.
45. *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York, 1987. p75.
46. *Ibid.* pp78-9.
47. Lyn Hejinian "Strangeness" *The Language of Inquiry* University of California Press, 2000. p138.
48. Charles Bernstein "Artifice of Absorption" *A Poetics* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1992. p87. Bernstein notes that this passage is based on the following passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*: "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its corporeality; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication . . . the thickness of the body, far from rivalling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh." *op cit.* p135.
49. Charles Bernstein, *ibid.* p86.

Following spread: Pauline Rhodes *Intensum/Extensum* (1981/1998) detail; steel sheet, steel grid, wood, rust-stained cloth, rust-stained paper; installed in *Action Replay* at Artspace

Inside cover: Adrian Hall, stills from *Studio Souvenir, Plasma Cast Iron Foam Co.* (1971) Super-8 film. Photos: New Zealand Film Archive, Wellington







## Action Replay: Post-script

Published by Artspace, Auckland and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth following the exhibition series *Action Replay: Post-Object Art* at Artspace 6–16 October, 20 October–7 November and 10–27 November 1998; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 14 November–13 December 1998; Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki 28 November 1998–31 January 1999.

ISBN 0 908848 44 7

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Funded by Creative New Zealand and New Plymouth District Council.  
Edited by Stella Brennan, Robert Leonard and Hanna Scott.  
Designed and typeset by Egan-Reid Ltd.

ARTSPACE

PUBLICATIONS

GOVETT-BREWSTER  
ART GALLERY

*Action Replay* was curated by Christina Barton, Wytan Curnow, John Hurrell, Robert Leonard, and featured work by Jim Allen, Billy Apple, Bruce Barber, Mel Bochner, City Group, Betty Collings, Philip Dadson, Andrew Drummond, Adrian Hall, Terrence Handscomb, Christine Hellyar, Maree Horner, Darcy Lange, John Lethbridge, Annea Lockwood, Colin McCahon, Leon Narbey, Roger Peters, Pauline Rhodes, Peter Roche, Warren Viscoe.





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