

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**BILLY APPLE
LESS IS MOORE
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY IAN WEDDE**

Billy Apple

Less Is Moore

28 March 2009, 00.00 to 23.59

**Salamanca Lawn, Botanic Gardens,
Wellington**

Wellington City is known for its commitment to public sculpture, especially through the efforts of the Wellington Sculpture Trust, a charitable organisation whose members are dedicated to enhancing the environs of the city with works of art, which began its work in 1982. Henry Moore's Bronze Form (1985-6) is the second sculpture acquired for the city through the efforts of the Trust and the only substantial work by this major international figure to be sited in public space in New Zealand. Purchased for the unprecedented sum of 300,000 in 1987, with funds gifted by Fletcher Challenge through Wellington City Council's Arts Bonus Scheme, it remains the jewel in the civic crown. For ONE DAY SCULPTURE Billy Apple engaged with Henry Moore's Bronze Form in a manner characteristic of his practice and its intentions. Treating this work as his subject he drew attention to a set of issues specific to Moore's work in its Wellington location. By taking Henry Moore as his subject Apple consciously negotiated the changing history of sculptural practice and located himself within that trajectory, raising vital questions about the role and fate of art in public space.

*Commissioned by the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington
Project Curator: Tina Barton*

Whole-some: 'Billy Apple: Less is Moore'

The plan

My plan is to visit Henry Moore's *Inner Form* (1985-86) on its grassy slope above Wellington's Lady Norwood Rose Garden, have a think about Billy Apple's One Day Sculpture project to admonish the city to scrape the 'protective coating' off it, and then return on the one day itself and see Apple's promised billboard: a before, meanwhile, and after narrative structure.

Nothing could be simpler – and nothing is. The first complication is that *Inner Form* is more correctly (the Henry Moore Foundation insists) called *Bronze Form*. This adjustment to the title that appears on the work's plaque implicitly removes the *Form* from the *Shelter* (see below) of which it is an integral, indeed internal, part. To keep this

shift in view – and to keep in view a certain shiftiness in the work's disposition – I will continue to call the work *Inner Form*, because looking at a weighty, free-standing, out-there sculpture through the nomination 'inner' already gives the work a shape-shifter character. Not just the work's surface appearance, its face value if you like, but even its situated mass are in discussion here, our attention drawn by Billy Apple to a shimmer of instability around this apparently implacable object.

The first visit

On a crisp autumn day, the walk from the Kelburn cable car terminus through the park and down to Moore's *Form* is a pleasant fusion of nature and culture: birds twitter, Mary Louise Browne's elegant word-stairs ascend into damp shadows; and there it is – the large bronze form, looking somewhat like a dully gleaming Easter Island statue, gazing

across at the stubbled zone of Tinakori Hill where pines have been felled to be replaced by indigenous plants. An implacable stare-down: 'Fell *me* if you dare!' Or a kind of Ozymandias monument – not just an historically inscrutable figure, but an actor in an artistic competition, in which Billy Apple is playing Horace Smith to Henry Moore's Percy Bysshe Shelley in their famous sonnet joust of 1817: 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'

But I am losing the plot, or inventing one. Paying real attention, what do I notice? I have seen this work at Perry Green, Moore's estate in Hertfordshire now administered by the Henry Moore Foundation, as a component of the much larger sculpture *Large Figure in a Shelter* (which visitors to Te Papa's exhibition, *Henry Moore: Journey through Form* in 2002 will remember a smaller version of). Now, on its own, I see that it may be called 'inner form' not just because it (elsewhere) is inside an outer form, but also because it accomplishes one of Moore's characteristic (or even 'signature') spatial effects. Walking around *Inner Form*, approaching it from above on the slope of the hill, then from below walking up to it, looking at the different ways it presses itself out into space (a horn-like form here, a sharp profile there, a hollow, a flat plane, a swelling) it is clear that the form's 'innerness' is as much about describing or filling a negative space as it is about articulating a solid mass with a surface.

What else? That it is not as shiny as I remember the outdoor sculpture at Perry Green was; hardly covered in verdigris and tui shit but a bit mottled, dullish. Nearby, on the other side of the path down the hill, is a housing with an aperture: a video surveillance camera? Further away near the tennis courts off Salamanca Rd is another housing, an electricity transformer. This is covered in the kinds of tagging the video camera is on the lookout for over at *Inner Form*.

The plaque adjacent to the work contains an important item of information, a reference to Wellington City Council's Arts Bonus Scheme. Under this scheme, developers (such as Fletcher Challenge Limited) were able to win plot easements on building plans in proportion to the value of a commissioned artwork. Moore was not commissioned, but I guess the outcome was the same: Fletcher Challenge would have been able (say) to add a floor to a building on the strength of the purchase price of *Inner Form*. The negative space the *Form* fills, then (Fletcher's having filled in the forms), may seem to

resemble that of Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* (1990) or her notorious Turner Prize-winning *House* (1993) – casts of the spaces inside buildings, negative space given mass, or – in the Arts Bonus case of *Inner Form* – the vacant or potential architectural space of a plot easement given the substance of capital realised as mass. At the same time, just to complicate things, the *Form*'s somewhat shiny appearance tilts our perception of it (and its value) towards surface. Whatever its latent mass and meaning may consist of, its manifest significance is in, or on, the surface you admire for the way it *appears*. The work's splendour is, at first sight, more bling than thing, more surface aesthetics than substance epistemology; it's with the pay-and-display crowd over at evolutionary psychology.

What else do I know from having worked on a Moore project in the past? That, contrary to an easily made assumption, there are more Moores inside than out; that the standard patinas of both inside and outside works are usually *applied* rather than accreted, and that these applications are often refreshed by conservators from Perry Green, who prefer surface protection to barriers, electric fences, or guards with Rottweilers; that the weathering of outside sculptures allegedly favoured by Moore was often, in fact, a less than completely 'natural' process; even so, that more recent administrators of the Moore Foundation's assets (including the brand) have possibly been more zealous than the artist in their conservation policies.

Having a think

It is not easy to hear the tone of Billy Apple's title – 'Less is Moore' – because, given Apple's deliberate, reductive, and sometimes sardonic concision, one would have to assume either that its naffness is intentional and implies irony; or that we are meant to hear it literally and therefore, as it were, tonelessly.

This space between the tonelessly literal and the ironically naff (at a stretch, between the 'natural' and the 'cultural') is, of course, where Apple likes to play. Getting strung out across the space is what is likely to happen to us, and this consequence may, too, be a calculated one. His well-known I.O.U. and N.F.S. works are just what they say they are: in the first case, a token of redeemable value lodged against capital; in the second, a work that is not for sale lodged nonetheless within the security of a collection's

insurance and conservation resources. But this toneless or deadpan stare-down then has consequences on a scale from mildly ironic to agent provocateur. The brand relationship of art to capital, the transaction relationship of art value to commodity value, and the signification relationship of gesture to material, are brought sharply into focus. Again, at this stage, the focus is at once literal and provocative: at once a toneless 'This is just how it is,' and a provocative 'And what are you going to do about it?'

Likewise – to bring the various terminologies devolving from 'natural' into play – let's consider Apple's plan for a ceramic apple pie dish divided into serving segments according to exact Fibonacci or golden section proportions, or the real *organic* Billy apple that might make its way into school-lunch boxes with the assistance of Saatchi & Saatchi's marketing clout. The apple pie will be just that – a tasty, wholesome dessert divided into segments that are in some measure convenient. But who can utter the words 'apple pie' without suspecting that their natural 'whole-some-ness' has been infiltrated by the mordant (albeit anachronistic) pragmatism of the 33_% dealer's cut? No *whole* pie for you, kid, you have to give up a slice, that's how the unnatural world works. And this juicy organic Billy apple: someone persuaded your mum to buy it for you, and while you thank her for your healthy bite of the apple you should also be thanking the marketing guy who put the whole-some idea in her head.

If the invitation of Apple's work is to enter the space of play between the tonelessly literal and the subversively ironic, what kind of event are we being invited to by 'Less is Moore', Apple's billboard project associated with Henry Moore's *Inner Form* (1985–86) on the Salamanca Lawn in Wellington's Botanic Gardens? At the most literal (and toneless) level, Apple's billboard is promised to demand simple respect for Henry Moore's alleged injunction against 'protecting' his work from the effects of weathering and patina out in the 'natural world'. That Moore preferred and intended his outdoors sculpture to be affected by the elements and atmosphere of its surroundings was endorsed in the case of *Inner Form* by no less an advisor than Professor Bernard Meadows, the chief administrator of the Moore Estate, on 20 April 1988, in a telephone conversation with Bruce Wallace, Communications Manager at Fletcher Challenge Ltd, the work's principal sponsor, recorded in a memo sent to John Baldwin, Fletcher's Director of Corporate Affairs. So, please, suggests Apple straightforwardly (tonelessly) in 2009, can we remove the 'protective coating' from this work and return it to the condition preferred by Moore himself?

Sounds reasonable. But why should Apple care? Moore, after all, represents modernist sculptors not just one but at least two generations back from the students Apple shared digs with while studying design at the Royal College of Art in London at the dawn of the 1960s. Moore's narrative references to form, especially the found forms of the natural world such as the human figure, bleached bones, etc., his use of materials and processes that retained the hallmarks of hands-on modelling, and not least his characteristic publicity shots wearing a splattered apron, had already been declared redundant in the 1960s by his former assistant Anthony Caro in a classic Oedipal or sorcerer's apprentice move. Caro himself was somewhat the older guy at the party by the time the natural Kiwi Barrie Bates bleached his hair unnaturally with Lady Clairol Instant Creme Whip and rebranded as Billy Apple in 1962. Apple went to New York a couple of years later, an even more emphatic distance from the grand master of Perry Green contemplating an elephant's skull and getting modelling clay on his bib.

The reasons why Apple should (or does) care may be what tip the 'Less is Moore' injunction past simple common sense (please just do what we are told Moore wanted) in the direction of irony and subversion. For a start, 'less is more' sounds like a general slogan for the stringent economies of means and ends with which modernism was frequently preoccupied in Moore's early days. Modified by Apple, this pithy line of advertising copy folds together a modernist icon, a catchphrase for a key modernist value-set, and 1960s urban Pop art's romance with Madison Avenue. It also takes up the challenge to move modernism's reductive impulse a whole lot further: in fact, to move art well away from art. And it deploys this combination of references on a billboard (or billyboard, perhaps), an object whose value is signalled emphatically by its impeccable, impervious, glossy, well protected surface. No verdigris, water stains or weathering permitted here! Sharply executed design replaces handicraft virtuosity, brand identity replaces signature, surface replaces presence, and production values replace creative genius.

And then, by the time Fletcher Challenge Ltd, the Wellington Sculpture Trust, and the City Council had decided that a work by Henry Moore was desirable for

Wellington in the 1980s, the Moore Foundation was already a global enterprise of large appeal (one might guess) to Billy Apple. At Perry Green, Moore made small clay maquettes which a team of assistants scaled up in plaster on wire armatures. These were subsequently turned into moulds and bronze casts were made from them, most of which came in editions. These editions were marketed to an international clientele, the great big ones to great big cities, corporations, and museums; the middle sized ones to small cities like Wellington, and the little ones to collectors with no doubt spacious but nonetheless domestic room for them. This was an efficient and extremely profitable industrial enterprise which made the Moore brand ubiquitous on a global scale. Not surprisingly, that brand was carefully guarded and managed. Decisions about which works went where were not made by clients on the basis that they had shown they could afford to shop for what they wanted, but by an advisory and consulting process that involved Moore himself in diminishing degrees until his death in 1986, and subsequently by the Foundation's loyal staff. The work continues: 'Henry Moores' are still shipping.

In their zeal to protect Wellington's 'Henry Moore' and, by implication, to protect the value of the Moore brand and its associated brand value to the city, the protectionists have, however, stepped into the very trap that has made Billy Apple's eyes light up like Bengal flares. By keeping the product of a scrupulously managed commercial process bright and shiny, by denying the 'less is more', organicist modernist ethos of the work, by enhancing its industrial, urban character at the expense of its natural inclination to weathering and patina, they have shifted it affrontingly, inappropriately, into Billy Apple's neighbourhood. No longer looking anything like the natural, elemental product of beach-walks, bone collecting, clay squeezing, and (eventually) being kept shiny only if sheep rub up against it, *Inner Form* has lumbered across a couple of art generations, has pursued Billy Apple from rural Hertfordshire via New York to New Zealand, and here confronts him with a pallid, glistening, pancake makeup, surface-privileging, fashion-spread travesty of the pop art scene in which he thought he had found a safe haven from handcrafted modernism all those years ago – a haven where billboards, signwriters and concept gurus such as Saatchi's CEO Worldwide Kevin 'Lovebite' Roberts rule supreme. No wonder Apple wants *Inner Form* vanishing-creamed back to where it belongs, on a green hillside somewhere off the beaten track in the Bronze Age of modernism.

But, thinking this through in advance of the actual encounter (and bearing in mind Apple's demonstrated commitment to natural products such as organic apple pies), one soon discovers an intriguing final twist: Billy Apple's own zeal in respect of natural products including organic apples is entirely sincere and non-ironic, and thus the tone of 'Less is Moore', strung across the space between literal (just clean the damn thing!) and provocative (get off of my patch!), has a subwoofer in it, which grumbles, with a hint of impatience, something like, 'Just do the right, the wholesome, the *natural* thing – how would you feel standing there in public season after season with that blonded, Lady Clairol Instant Creme Whip look?'

Visiting 'Less is Moore'

When sighted on another perfect day, the billboard – as you would expect – is revealed to have been crisply executed in Apple's familiar and preferred fonts and colours. It looks like 'an Apple' in the same way that *Inner Form* looks like 'a Moore'. A fairly strident admonition to the city council and the people of Wellington is accompanied by a large facsimile of the Fletcher Challenge memo incorporating the advice of Professor Bernard Meadows. Some people have left real apples on the pediment of the Moore; another (Pacific Rose) lodges inside the billboard's cross-bracing. People come and go; they take photos. Having read the billboard text, most of them get up close to the Moore and scrutinise its surface; many have a covert scratch at it. No one riots, sets fire to the Apple, takes to the Moore with a rasp. Then (like me) they wander down the hill to the Begonia House. Here, the lineaments of the stretch between natural and artificial are made simple: allusions to Monet's *nymphéa* float on a pond, the arcade structure of the building recalls Walter Benjamin's famous analysis of commercial passages in nineteenth-century Paris (and their counter-relationship to the Impressionist garden), and I hear a delighted woman describe an outrageous, can't-be-real pink-rimmed begonia as 'nature's work of art'.

I'm with Billy Apple in the end. Though I believe, on the strength of what I learned about procedures at the Moore Foundation in Perry Green, that he has overcooked his case for the natural-look *Inner Form*, and though I know it to be a work of art not a bone (or begonia), still, its appearance or manifest is a tad ... shrill for my liking.

But this is a matter of taste, not very interesting. What is interesting – what has been interesting, as one might expect from the circumstances of the project – has been Apple's ability to touch those flinching, sensitive points of contact between civic and public space, latent and manifest value, surface and substance. What has also been touching, in another sense, has been to see that Billy Apple cares about what has happened to Henry Moore's work.

And what has been most striking, at the conclusion of my plan, knowing that the billyboard has been towed away, has been the fact that the *appearance* of Apple's one-day intervention – both its physical presence on-site and how it looked – has throughout been less important than the rumour of its imminent arrival and the potential stimulus of its message. It hardly needed to be there to have been there. Teeny slice, big aftertaste.

Billy Apple

Billy Apple was born Barrie Bates in Auckland, New Zealand in 1935. He left New Zealand in 1959 to study graphic design at the Royal College of Art in London. Here he played an active role as a member of the notorious 'pop' generation (David Hockney, R.J. Kitaj, and others). After graduating in 1962, he changed his name to Billy Apple. In 1964 he moved to New York where he developed a series of site-related performance and installation works and opened his own gallery (Apple), which operated as an alternative venue for performance-based and conceptual projects. Apple remained in New York until the late 1980s, exhibiting his work in various venues, including Leo Castelli Gallery. Since the early 1980s Apple has complemented his installation practice with text based works that draw attention to the art system and highlight the network of relations that operate between artist, dealer, and collector. In the late 1980s Apple returned to live in New Zealand where he now lives and works. His works have been included in a variety of major international exhibitions including: *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin* (New York, 1999); *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture* (Frankfurt & Liverpool, 2002–3); and *Art of the 60s from Tate Britain* (Auckland, 2006). A major survey of Apple's work will be shown at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam in 2009.

Ian Wedde

Ian Wedde was born in 1946. He is the author of five novels, a dozen collections of poetry and two collections of essays, the most recent of which was the critically acclaimed *Making Ends Meet* as well as edited anthologies and art catalogues. His first novel, *Dick Seddon's Great Dive*, was awarded a National Book Award for fiction in 1976. In 1986, *Symmes Hole* established him as a major voice in Pacific fiction. Wedde is the recipient of numerous awards, fellowships and grants. Among the most recent are the Meridian Energy Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship at Menton in France (2005), a Fulbright New Zealand Travel Award to the USA (2006), an Arts Foundation Laureate Award (2006), and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Auckland (2007). His book about the artist Bill Culbert is due in 2009. He lives and works in Wellington.

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Recommended Reading

Art at Te Papa, Wellington: Te Papa Press (edited by William McAloon), 2009 (forthcoming).

'Being Billy Apple', film directed by Leanne Pooley, Specific Films, 2008.

Speculation [book documenting 30 artists published by Artspace Auckland as New Zealand's contribution to the Biennale of Venice 2007], Auckland: Artspace, 2007.

Christina Barton, 'Who is Billy Apple? The Artist after the Death of the Subject', *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture* (Auckland), no 1, 2007, pp. 80–95.

Christina Barton, 'Billy Apple, From the V.U.W. Art Collection, 2005', in *In View: Works from the VUW Art Collection*, Wellington: Adam Art Gallery, 2006, p. 2.

Christina Barton, 'Billy Apple: a history of the brand', Auckland: Sue Crockford Gallery, np. et al., *Contemporary* [London], no 74, 2005, p. 60.

Wystan Curnow, 'Report: the Given as an Art-political Statement', *Art New Zealand* 15, 26–33, 60–61 and 65, 1989.

Wystan Curnow, 'The New York Art Scene 2', *Art New Zealand* 9, 16–17 and 73, April 1978.