

## Stephen Bambury born 1951

In 1998, the Dutch curator Rudi Fuchs made this telling comment: 'Stephen Bambury, in retrospect, may become part of the tradition of Mondrian or Malevich; more Malevich I believe'. This reference to Kasimir Malevich, Russia's eminent suprematist artist of the early 20th century, indicates much more than a visual comparison. It reveals how assiduously Bambury has been dedicated to abstract painting since he was a student. With tenacity and insight, he has established a significant vocation as a painter in the tradition of Malevich and Gordon Walters.

Throughout his career, Bambury has often used a square format that contains within itself further square compositional elements, setting up visual conversations where square forms are placed in dialogue with one another. One of these, the 1993 painting *By Equilibrated Oppositions*, has four differently coloured squares within a darker square that not only reinforces the edges of the work, but also

creates an architectural intervention in the spaces where the artwork is displayed.

*Red, Black, White* is wonderfully minimal while also containing dynamic complexity. To New Zealand viewers, the three colours may echo 19th-century Māori rafter painting. The way that each rectangle abuts two others sets up a tautness that sometimes appears to be rotating in a clockwise direction while, at another moment, it seems to have an anticlockwise movement. These tensions are both subtle and articulate.

Bambury has a deep understanding of how suprematist painting can influence our response to three-dimensional space. *Red, Black, White* brings forward memories of Malevich's spiritual images of squares such as the symbolic 1923 *Black Cross* held in the State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Although *Red, Black, White* is modest in scale, it has a monumentality that marks it as one of New Zealand's key paintings of the 1970s. **RB**

### Red, Black, White 1978

acrylic on canvas  
463 × 464 mm  
purchased 1999

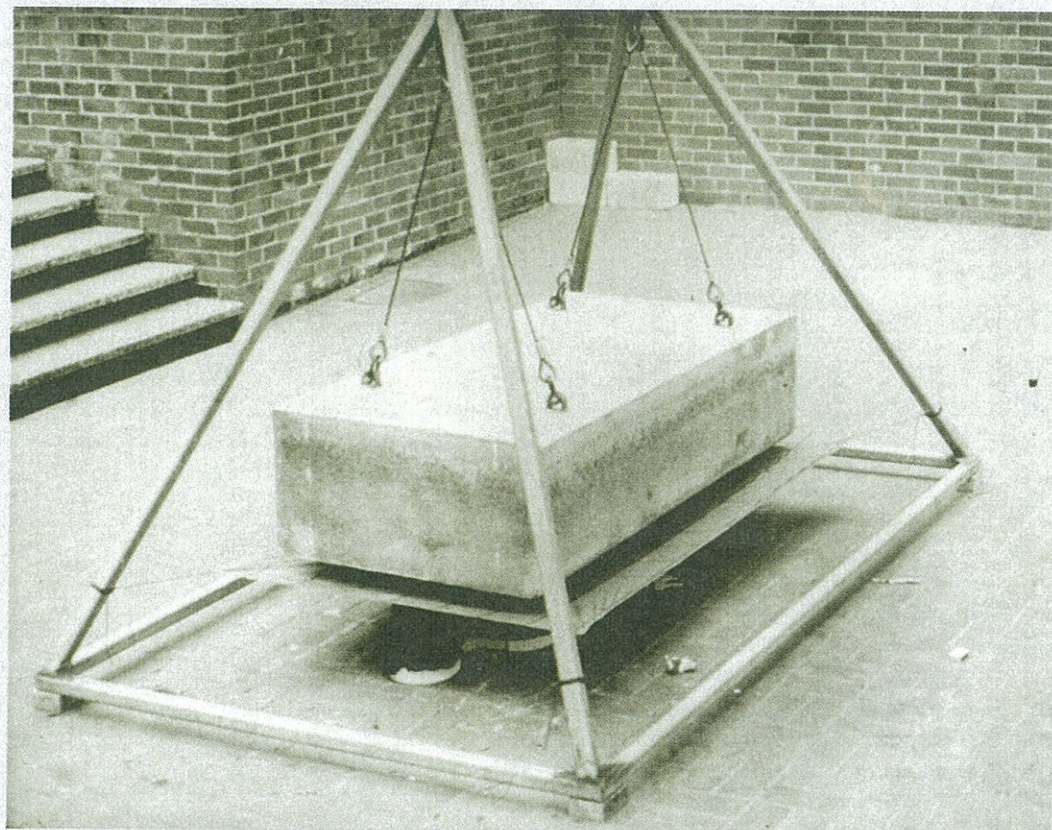
## Post-Object Art

Christina Barton

In May 1977 Auckland City Art Gallery published a document in its quarterly journal exonerating the Gallery of all responsibility for the well-being of artist Gray Nicol (fig 2). This typed statement was drawn up in December 1975 on the occasion of Nicol's *Project Programme* which saw the artist spend 24 hours shackled to the ground under a rectangular block of concrete suspended a few centimetres above his body by cables bolted to a steel frame of the artist's design (fig 1). The printed statement, co-signed by Nicol and exhibition officer John Maynard, registered an unusual contract – insuring the Gallery against any liability should the artist be hurt during his performance. Unlike the steel and concrete contraption, the fate of which is not clear today, the document survives on the pages of the *Quarterly* (the originals are safely stowed in the artist's file in the Gallery's library) as proof of what happened. This simple

piece of paper is typically all that is left of 'post-object art', a mode of working that came to the fore in the 1970s, which greatly expanded and transformed our understanding of what art can be and how artists and institutions relate.

Gray Nicol was a recent graduate of the Sculpture Department at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. Under the inspirational leadership of Jim Allen, the department was a seedbed for a range of radical practices that rethought the nature of sculpture. Here attention was turned away from the craft of object making to ephemeral actions, temporary constructions, thought processes and social interactions that focused on process rather than products, and engaged the actualities of real-life situations. His project was seventh in a series initiated by John Maynard, a sympathetic advocate for the 'new' art



that was being fostered by Allen at Elam, and staged at Auckland City Art Gallery between 1975 and 1978. These projects, and other similar activities, secured the Gallery's reputation as a vital venue in the history of post-object art.

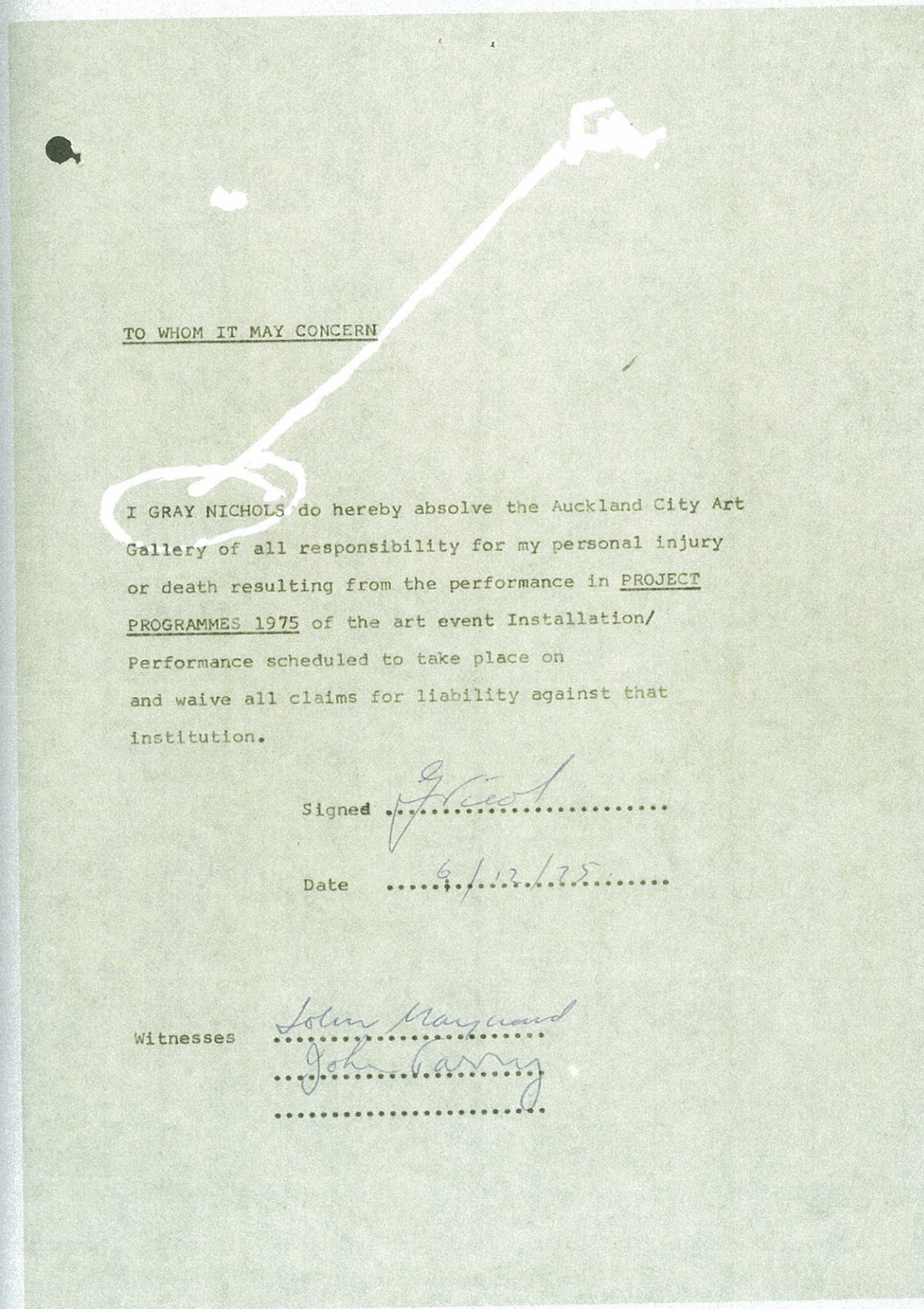
While Nicol's project was by no means the most ambitious, nor is it especially remembered, it exemplifies the conundrum this kind of art poses, both at the time and subsequently. Though a constructed object made of solid materials and fabricated with a degree of craft and technical ingenuity, Nicol's work was no conventional sculpture. Indeed its purpose was purely to provide the conditions for his particular test of endurance. Thus the definition of sculpture as a handmade object designed to be appreciated for its narrative, memorial or expressive meaning was replaced by an understanding of sculpture as a

situation in which the artist tested his own limits and those of his audience and the institution which enabled it. Taken down from its pedestal and pushed out into the world – in this instance the Gallery's forecourt – the object serves as a temporary prop, a tool to activate a response.

There were many instances in the *Project Programme* series in which materials were utilised to create situations that demanded a different set of responses. The series called on viewers to think about what art could and should be, and challenged their expectations by blurring the boundaries between the gallery and the world at large, even allowing the artist's actions to replace the production of any static object or painted picture. That Auckland City Art Gallery hosted such work is testament to a particular permeability between the institution and the contemporary art scene, enabled by a few key

↑  
Fig 1  
Gray Nicol  
born 1951  
Installation view: *Project Programme No 7* 1975  
E H McCormick  
Research Library  
Artist Files  
photo: John Daley

→  
Fig 2  
Gray Nicol  
born 1951  
*Project Programme*  
contract with Auckland  
City Art Gallery, 1975  
E H McCormick  
Research Library  
Artist Files



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I GRAY NICHOLS do hereby absolve the Auckland City Art Gallery of all responsibility for my personal injury or death resulting from the performance in PROJECT PROGRAMMES 1975 of the art event Installation/ Performance scheduled to take place on \_\_\_\_\_ and waive all claims for liability against that institution.

Signed Gray Nicol

Date 6/12/75

Witnesses

John Hayward  
John Barry

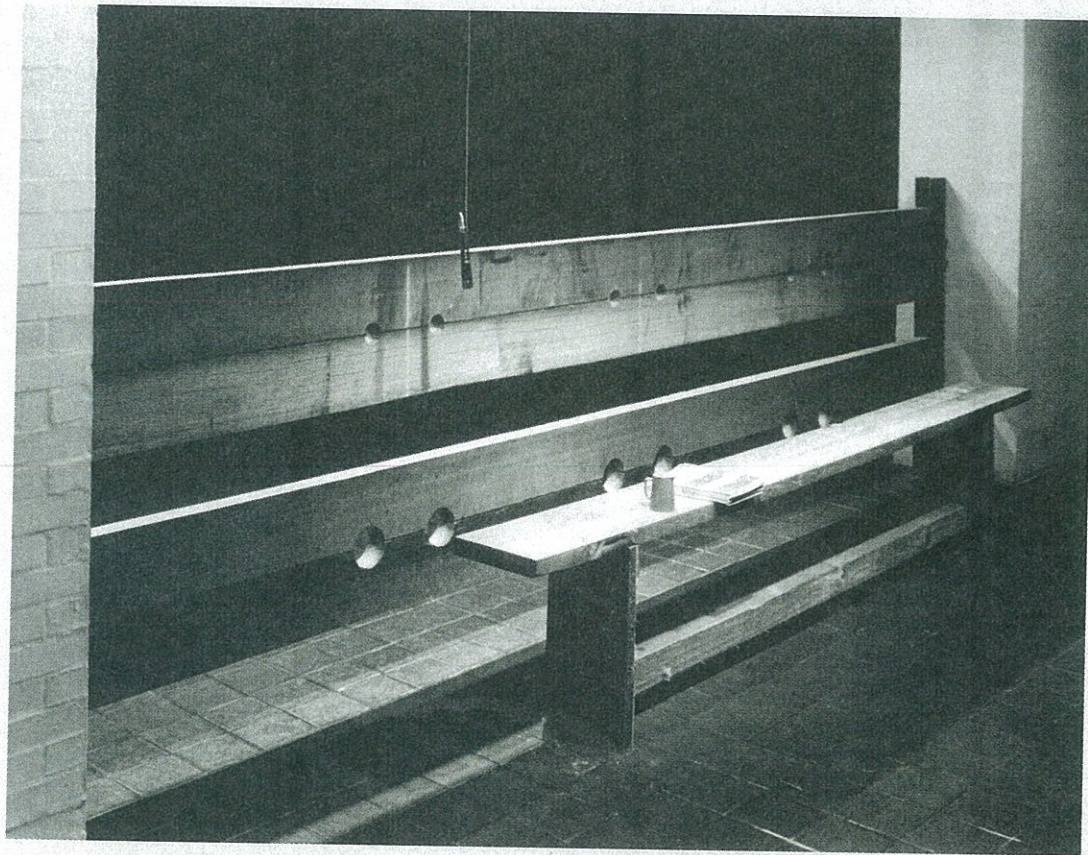


Fig 3  
**Bruce Barber**  
 born 1950  
 Installation view:  
*Stocks and Bonds/  
 On the Stocks* 1975  
 E H McCormick  
 Research Library  
 Artist Files  
 photo: John Daley

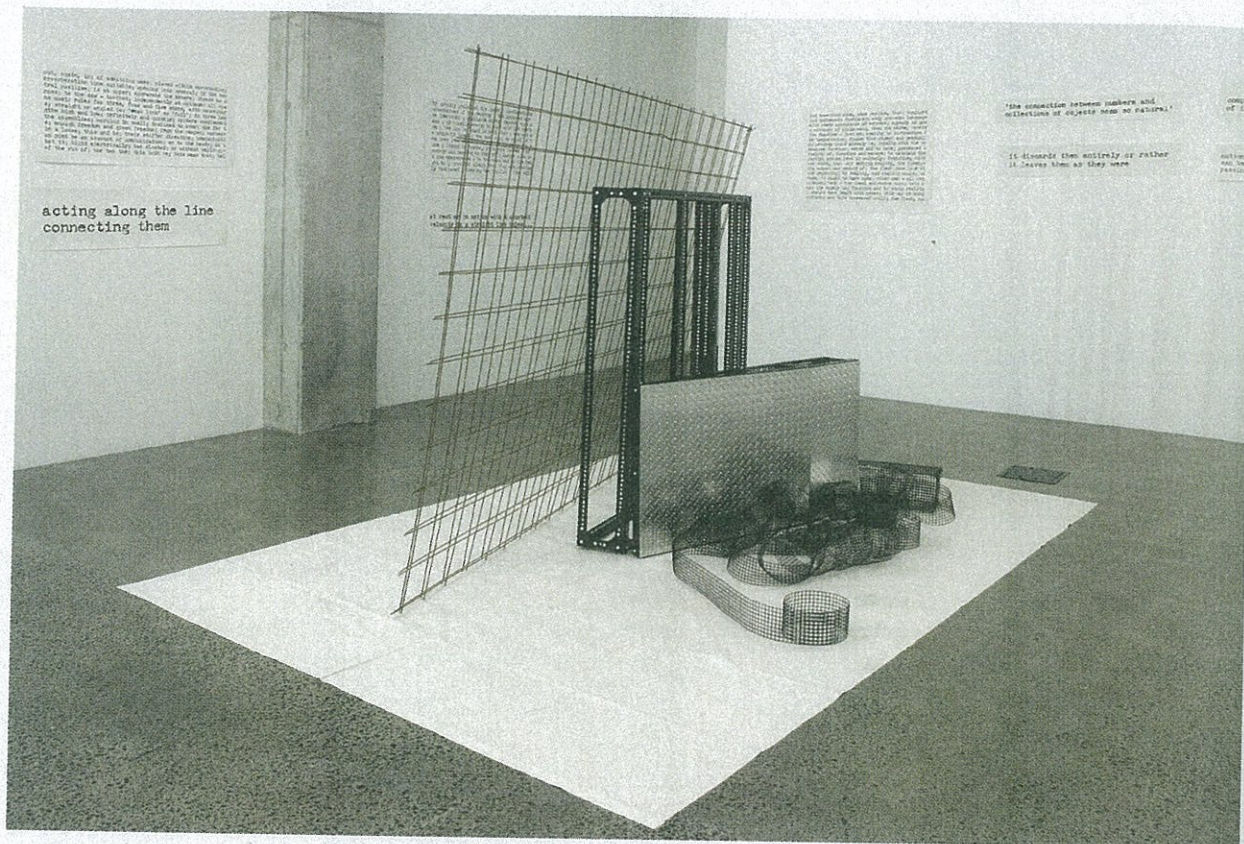
Fig 4  
**Andrew Drummond**  
 born 1951  
 Installation view:  
*Tattoo Tapes* 1976  
 E H McCormick  
 Research Library  
 Artist Files  
 photo: John Daley

Fig 5  
**David Mealing**  
 born 1948  
 Installation view:  
*Jumble Sale/  
 A Market Place* 1975  
 E H McCormick  
 Research Library  
 Artist Files  
 photo: John Daley

individuals who were responding to wider social, intellectual and political shifts. This led them to question the nature and purpose of art in a world fraught with inequalities and beset by the problems posed by consumer capitalism, which turned art into an exclusive commodity.

Given the usual role of the museum as a bastion of traditional aesthetic values and repository for cultural treasures, the *Project Programme* series was not

undertaken unself-consciously in relation to the gallery context. Indeed many of the artists addressed the institution as their subject, often to re-define its function as a corporate office (Kieran Lyons), a community hall (David Mealing) (fig 5), a place for public punishment (Bruce Barber) (fig 3), or a tattoo parlour (Andrew Drummond) (fig 4). Even Nicol, in his paradoxical insistence on a contract that guaranteed his 'freedom', reinforced the sense in which artists



and organisers knew that their gestures were enmeshed in a larger 'system'.

But perhaps post-object art's most effective challenge to the function of the museum was its temporality. If we consider what has survived this fruitful period and what has been accommodated by the Gallery within its collection, we find that such practices have proven effectively ephemeral, with a very few notable exceptions. These include a reconstruction of an important installation by Jim Allen, *O-AR 1*, 1975, 2006, (fig 6) photo-text documentation of Billy Apple's 1975 *8 x 8 A Subtraction* and videotapes by Phil Dadson.

Where they have survived is in the files of the Gallery's E H McCormick Research Library, as documents, photographs, publications, videotapes and slides. Here the work can be reconstituted but

not properly absorbed, so its recalcitrant relation to the institution can be upheld. In this sense and in this place, the situation and legacy of post-object art is by no means resolved; its status as art is still in question. This is perhaps why it continues to intrigue not only scholars of contemporary art's history, but also artists who today hark back to the radical precedents set in the 1970s.

Auckland Art Gallery has an ongoing role to play both as a repository for post-object art's history and as a forum where new gestures and experiments can be staged. This has most recently been borne out in a performance by Daniel Malone titled *Floor Piece*, 2007 (fig 8). The artist began the process of demolition that the building was about to undergo for its most recent major redevelopment, by taking to the tiles in the first floor galleries with a jackhammer. His gesture specifically

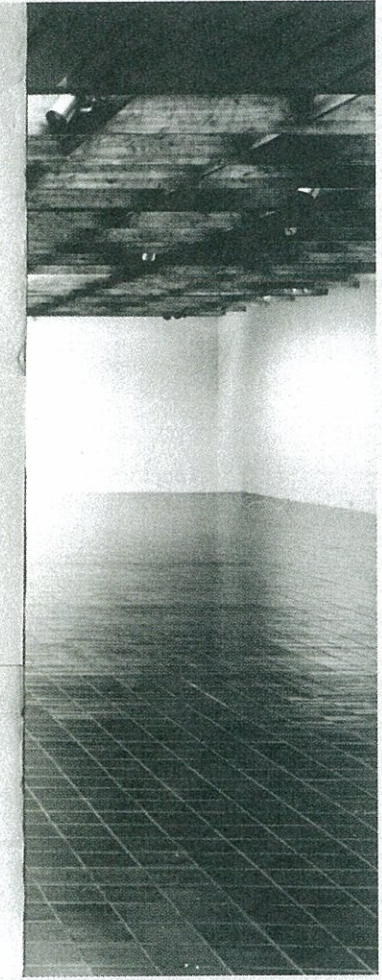
Fig 6  
Jim Allen  
born 1922  
*O-AR 1* 1975,  
2006 {remade}  
paper, steel,  
wooden sticks, calico  
and plastic mesh  
purchased 2006



Fig 7  
Billy Apple  
born 1935  
Installation view:  
*8 x 8 A Subtraction*  
1975  
E H McCormick  
Research Library  
Artist Files  
photo: John Daley

recalled the work *8 x 8 A Subtraction* that Billy Apple executed in 1975, in which the artist removed the wax from an 8-by-8 square of tiles in a subtractive action that is definitional of the post-object moment (fig 7). Malone, born in 1970, was just a child when Apple undertook this, but he knows it well from the documentary record also published in the *Quarterly*, which in this case takes the form of an essay by Wystan Curnow (another key supporter of post-object art) illustrated with photographs by John Daley that focus clearly on the tiled floor of the distinctive East Gallery where Apple's piece was executed.

Of course Apple's work has long gone, and now the spaces with their distinctive floor tiles have too, but we are extremely fortunate to be able to register this erasure in its most lasting form: as a displaced and immaterial representation that remains in



### Billy Apple

Auckland City Art Gallery 30 July – 13 August, 1975.  
Sponsored by ■ The Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

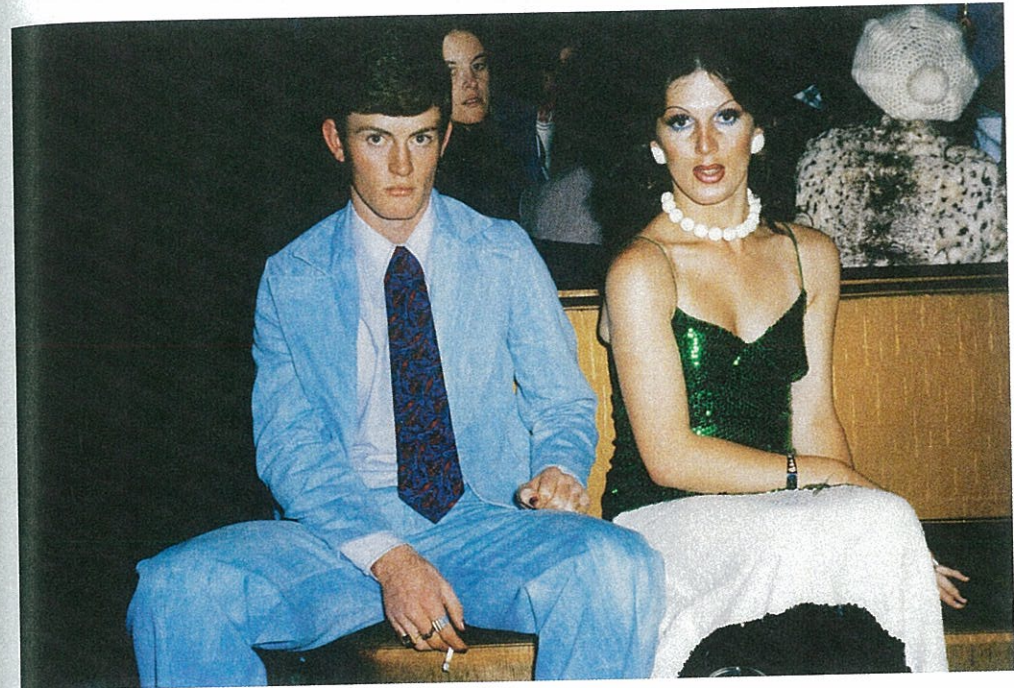
The result of subtraction is absence.

But absence cannot be defined as the result of subtraction, the reason being that absence does not necessarily imply that there was anything there to begin with.

circulation as a multiple image available to anyone who has access to the journal (now digitised and available on Auckland Art Gallery's website). Such is the purchase of post-object art on our imagination and our history. This art's radical displacement of the museum's traditional function guarantees a new role for the Gallery to ensure we do not forget it.



Fig 8  
**Daniel Malone**  
 born 1970  
*Floor Piece 2007*  
 Video still  
 5. 4. 3. 2. 1 Performance  
 Series  
 E H McCormick  
 Research Library  
 Artist Files



## Fiona Clark born 1954

'I had always been interested in people's image of themselves', wrote photographer Fiona Clark in 1985. Ten years earlier, as an Elam School of Fine Arts graduate, she had photographed her friends putting themselves on display at a 1974 Gay Lib dance party.

*Dianna Adams and Perry* was taken 'at the first ever Miss NZ Drag Queen Ball' held at Auckland's Peter Pan Cabaret. Clark recalls, 'Anybody who was anybody in the entertainment industry was there. It was a really big event.' Clark made these documentary photographs in the heart of downtown Auckland and although they were acquired by Auckland City Art Gallery in 1977, they have remained little known in the city where they were made.

Clark witnessed the emergence of the gay liberation movement while a student at Elam. She pushed for the foundation of a colour dark-room at the school. 'I could not photograph what I was doing in the night clubs and the people

of the night in black and white.' Clark's choice of subject matter and her use of colour photography were ground-breaking.

Clark's work has a political underpinning, anchored by conceptual as well as documentary impulses. Her images retain an intimacy that reflects her own role in this community, rather than a position of voyeur. She is not a bystander with a camera, she is a participant in the action, a documentarian with an agenda. 'I believe that continuity is the strength of my work. Some work feels like a one-night stand, you know. That's not necessarily bad, it's just what the work is about. It has no place with this work however. I still have regard for people I worked with and am working with again now as close friends.' <sup>NS</sup>

**Dianna Adams and Perry at Miss NZ Drag Queen Ball Auckland**  
 1975, 2010 (reprint)

c-type print  
 165 x 235 mm  
 purchased 1977

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**ART TOI**  
**NEW ZEALAND ART AT**  
**AUCKLAND ART GALLERY**  
**TOI O TĀMAKI**

Edited by Ron Brownson