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Remembering Ron

CHRISTINA BARTON

Grief has a house, as is said It is in the remembering [of the dead] and their work that we honour them.¹

I don't precisely recall the first time I met Ron Brownson, but it most likely would have been early in 1985, my first year researching my MA thesis. I was a student in the Department of Art History at the University of Auckland, where I was also tutoring. I had started mapping out my topic: a history of post-object art in the 1970s in New Zealand, a subject I came to after two years of study, which had given me a decent grounding in the history of New Zealand art and a sense of mission galvanised by exposure to the histories of conceptual art, experimental cinema and feminist art practice, encountered through the teachings of Michael Dunn, Tony Green, Elizabeth Eastmond, Alan Wright and Roger Horrocks. Although I was new to Auckland (arriving back from my first and only OE at the end of 1982 and moving there to further my studies in 1983), I was beginning to feel my way into the local art scene, meeting Elam students (who were still required to study art history), attending openings and hanging out with flatmates and fellow postgrads.

I would no doubt have made an appointment to visit the Research Library at Auckland City Art Gallery (as it was then called) to review records of the Gallery's innovative Project Programme series, initiated in 1975 by then-exhibition officer John Maynard, that showcased the new experimental practices fostered by Jim Allen at Elam School of Fine Arts

that were (in part) the subject of my thesis. I still have a sense of what that first visit to the library would have been like: knocking on the solid timber door at the top of the stairs opposite the old East and West Galleries, being let in by Ron, the librarian and sole occupant, who would have set me down at the large table where I would have been supplied with files relating to each of the artist's projects I was keen to interrogate. That room—with its book stacks, filing cabinets, display shelves, artist files, secret 'back rooms' and balcony overlooking the long-gone but memorably raucous fountain on the edge of Albert Park—became the crucible for my working life, a haven and den that set me on my intellectual and professional path.

I seem to recall the library was only open on Tuesdays (or by appointment), and I quickly learned that Ron's attitude to visitors was mercurial. Some people just never seemed to be able to get in. Those who did were clearly the ones Ron found interesting. I've never been clear why Ron opened the door to me, but let me suppose that my art historical interests aligned with his, especially regarding the kind of alternative practices that I was determined to document. I only vaguely understood that in addition to studying art history, completing his master's on Rita Angus, and taking on the role of librarian in 1978, Ron was a keen photographer and filmmaker, a member of City Group, a collective he formed with Vivienne Smith and Neil Pardington, that was making short, highly experimental Super 8 and 16mm films with jagged soundtracks and cut-up visuals,



Ron Brownson and visitors to the Research Library, c. 1979. Auckland Art Gallery Archive 1893-2017.
Courtesy of E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, (RC 2015/5).

shot in and around Auckland, featuring friends, fellow artists and occasional ring-ins, such as Rangihiroa Panoho, who, like me, was undertaking his MA in Art History and was also invited into Ron's private world. Apart from Ron's deep knowledge of art, his fascination for photography and his curiosity about certain kinds of people, I had no idea that he would go on (from 1995) to be the respected curator and polymath collector who is celebrated today.

The Research Library at Auckland Art Gallery was and is an extraordinary resource. With the dismantling of the Elam Library, it is without doubt the best specialist art library in Aotearoa. Featuring an impressive collection of books, journals and catalogues, it also houses archival collections, artist files, auction catalogues, exhibition records, and, while I was there, a collection of videotapes, deposited by the likes of Darcy Lange, and colour slides documenting every show staged in spaces across the city, a project Ron initiated with the help of the Gallery's photographers. Over the summers of 1986 and 1987, and then full time from 1988 until 1990, I worked as a research assistant, helping Ron with a host of duties, from labelling slides to filing newspaper clippings, re-housing books, helping with public enquiries, and as time went on, assisting with exhibition research and public programmes. It was from here that I curated my first exhibition, *After McCahon* (1989), and shepherded Billy Apple's touring exhibition, *As Good As Gold* (1990), into the Gallery's programme. I can truthfully say that the Research Library was my training ground and Ron

was my more than ideal teacher.

During my time there Ron showed me things that left indelible marks: photobooks by Larry Clark and Robert Mapplethorpe, rare publications on and by Andy Warhol, catalogues to key shows, obscure magazines and all manner of items that fuelled his curiosity. He and Roger Blackley (1953–2019), the curator of historical New Zealand art, his close friend and fellow art history graduate, demonstrated the responsibilities of gallery work, especially in their kind patience with members of the public. They showed me, too, what it took to be part of something, in their respectful nurturing of an older generation of art scholars, such as Una Platts and Eric McCormick—literally our discipline's founding figures—the encouragement they showed to misfit artists, and the warmth they extended to the 'little' people on staff, especially the technicians. I learned so much by being a fly on the wall in a space that stealthily retained its independence within the larger institution, as Gallery staff dropped in to let off steam, or Ron's favoured artists (old and young) called by to catch up on art-world gossip.

Ron hardly ever behaved like a boss, except once he directed me to interview Jean Horsley, an assignment I found daunting as it was my first formal artist-interview. I didn't realise it then, but looking back, it is clear that Ron sensed this would be a way for me to connect with a memorable woman artist, who would later invite me to her occasional lunches where an interesting assortment of women would gather in an



Ron Brownson (left), Roger Blackley (seated) and visitors to the Research Library, c.1992. Auckland Art Gallery Archive 1893-2017.
Courtesy of E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, (RO 2015/5).

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but all that surrounds
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informal, cross-generational salon fuelled by an unfortunate array of unpalatable food (she was no cook). I swear this is just one instance of Ron's 'sixth sense'. He once challenged me by suggesting I'd 'rather be sailing', a comment that struck home because I was in the first throes of a new romance, but also stung because it gave me the impression he didn't think I was serious. Typically, this throwaway line had me pegged; it inadvertently forced me to identify exactly where my commitments lay (and I recall it to this day). He became a lifelong touchstone and confidant, even if we largely went our separate ways.

That library and Ron's particular approach to its management are crucial to my subsequent engagement with the art system. Grounded by a holistic commitment to all that goes into art's ideation, production, presentation, documentation and interpretation, Ron taught me to value not just the finished artwork, but all that surrounds and supports it, from sketches, drawings, diagrams, letters, notes, invitation cards, audiotapes, photographic records, flyers and room sheets, printed reviews, journal articles and published books, to stories, memories, rumours and secrets. What's more, the Research Library grew through Ron's time into the key repository for an alternative history of art in Aotearoa, where the remains of time-based and ephemeral art practices have been preserved and are being built upon by the subsequent efforts of curators and archivists who are continuing Ron's good work.

¹Ron Brownson, extract from a personal email to the author on the death of Vivian Lynn, 3 December 2018.