

PROLEGOMENON TO AN AESTHETICS OF MACHINERY.

1.1 As Good As Gold.

The idea for this essay occurred to me in the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1991. I will describe the circumstances in order to frame the intentions and purpose of the project. The exhibition I had attended, entitled *Good as Gold: Art Transactions 1981-1991*, was a survey of the work of New Zealand- born artist Billy Apple. I was aware that Billy Apple was an important Contemporary New Zealand Artist and so I considered a visit to the gallery that day to be a part of my education. I had just left the small town of my upbringing, and was determined to educate myself about art.

The canvases on display were all much the same — commercial poster- type lettering, spelling out SOLD TO THE BRIERLY CORPORATION BY BILLY APPLE, or SOLD TO THE COLLECTION OF THE AUCKLAND CITY COUNCIL. Also in the exhibition were several photographs of Apple buying and selling things (a car, a trailer), the events recorded being ‘art happenings.’ Apple’s art was, to some extent, a comment on the notion of art as a commodity, that is, a unit of exchange. (Several artworks were, however, concerned with more metaphysical themes, such as the purity of number, and the beauty of the golden ratio).

One object in the exhibition, however, did catch my eye, and gratified my desire to see something beautiful.¹ At the far end of the downstairs gallery, mounted on a low varnished wooden plinth, was a glistening black motorcycle; an immaculate 500cc Norton.

The sculptural quality of the machine’s gleaming form was enhanced by the austerity of the gallery’s white walls and ceiling. On the rear shock- absorber was a decal reading “Vintage motorcycle racing. Sponsored by Billy Apple.” I was by now more interested in the motorcycle, in this hallowed space, and its placement upon the varnished wooden floorboards of the Auckland City Art Gallery triggered something. Apple, I thought, had inadvertently forced an intuition upon me.

¹ It is a debatable point as to whether or not beauty is still an important principle in contemporary art theory, criticism or practice. I will assume that, at least in the case of applied fine arts (architecture, furniture design and so on) beauty is still an important part of an axiology of artistic worth.