

# Books & Culture

## PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF EDGINESS

Art plonked in public spaces provokes affection and derision in equal measure, but its worst fate is indifference. **by SALLY BLUNDELL**

**T**he *Philanthropist's Stone*, by Dunedin artist Scott Eady, a gold-plated bronze nugget studded with "candles" atop a 4m Corinthian column recently installed in Wellington's Cuba Street, is bold, vibrant and, in what has become a tradition of public art, inflammatory. "Majestic and interesting," wrote one online commentator about the work, commissioned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the death of arts patron Thomas George Macarthy. A "giant gold poo", muttered another.

"We always get vocal people who don't like [a work]," says Sue Elliott, chairwoman of the Wellington Sculpture Trust, which selected Eady for the work, "and we get people who love it. But we needed something that was a vibrant celebration, not just a commemoration, and this is so vital, so perfect for the site."

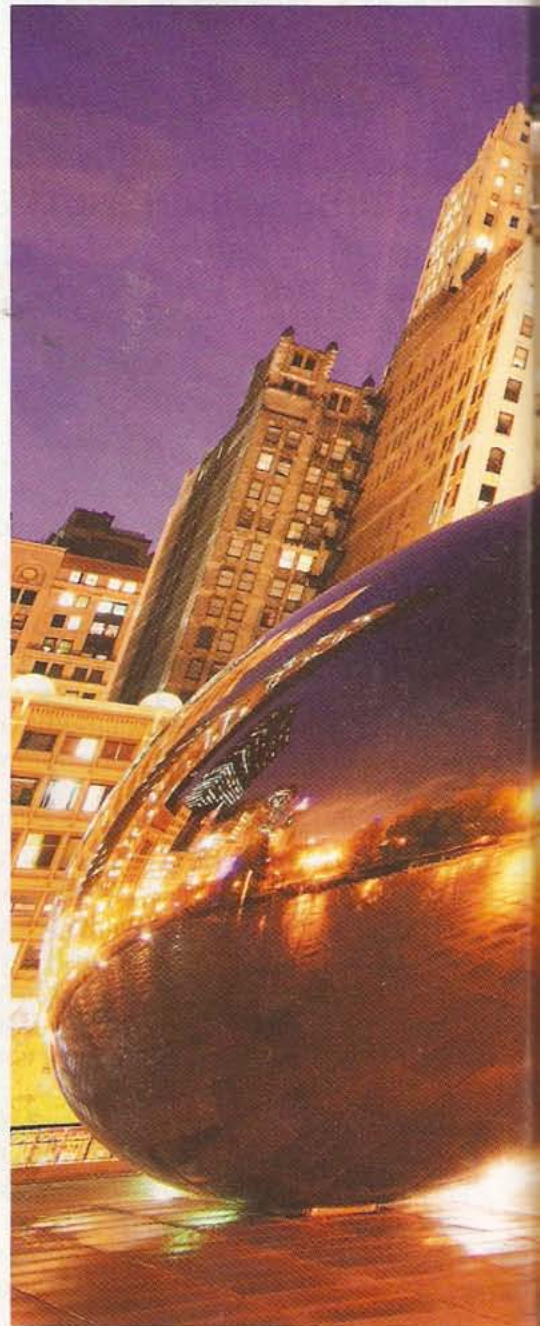
From the day that plans for the new Michael Parekowhai sculpture, commissioned by Auckland Council for Queens Wharf, were revealed, commentary was vigorous. *The Lighthouse* (a working title) is, wrote one observer, a beautiful idea. Others said it was too expensive (although no ratepayer money is going into the project), the state-house form too quotidian, the Venetian glass chandeliers, depicting the Matariki constellation, way OTT (although only three of a total of 34

submissions opposed the project).

"Is it provocative?" says curator and writer Heather Galbraith of Massey University. "Hell, yeah. It hits so many uncomfortable aspects of social change: accessibility of housing, sales of state houses, the wharf extension. But it is also highly considered. This symbol of home perched precariously looking out over the harbour – it may not be what people think of as aesthetically pleasing, but I think the effect will be really charged and poignant."

Spinning and glittering on Christchurch's northern motorway, *Fanfare*, by Neil Dawson, initially commissioned for Sydney's 2004 New Year's celebrations and gifted to the city with a \$1.3 million upgrade and installation price tag, has been hailed as an "amazing sight" by some, derided as "a foil-wrapped golf ball", an "eye soar" (sic), by others. "Why not just a bronze statue of Richie McCaw?" carped one commentator.

*OnDo*, a large temporary work on Auckland's Dominion Rd by Seoul-born, Auckland-based artist Seung Yul Oh, comprises oversized chopsticks drawing noodles out of a rubbly patch of footpath in a play on the area's ongoing roadworks (yes, the orange barrier is part of the work) and the ubiquitous window displays in Japanese and Korean restaurants. It has been met with delight and derision. In New Lynn the seemingly phallic forms



of the \$200,000 aluminum mesh work *Transit Cloud* by Gregor Kregar and Sara Hughes attracted predictable jibes.

Te Papa's recent decision to spend \$750,000 on four works from Simon Denny's headline-grabbing *Secret Power* exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale has also attracted the inevitable naysayers. Although not an outdoor exhibit, the work, playing on the graphic language of US National Security Agency documents

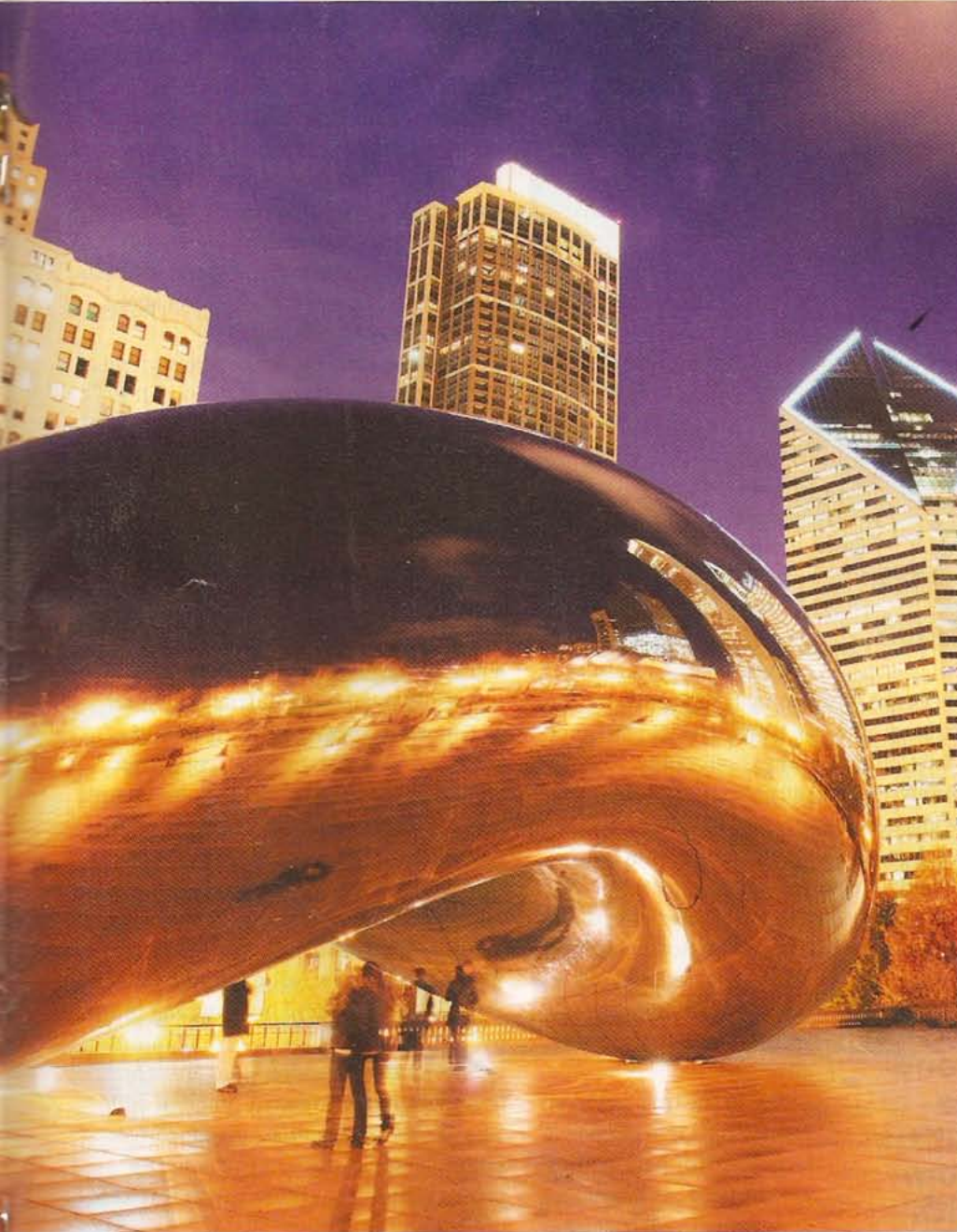
**BOOKS 51**  
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**BOOKS 52**  
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**DANCE 54**  
Choreographer Ross McCormack explores the point between perfection and ruin

**FILM 58**  
*Everest* is a gore-free horror story with the peak as serial killer



**Bean there:** Chicago's *Cloud Gate*.

leaked by Edward Snowden, is already being criticised along the usual lines of a) cost, b) execution, and c) why are we at Venice anyway?

But the Biennale, says Sarah Farrar, senior art curator at Te Papa, is an important opportunity to showcase intelligent, innovative and sophisticated New Zealand art on the world stage. "And artists create

incredibly ambitious new work and put their heart and soul into it."

Because New Zealand does not have a permanent pavilion in Venice, it has to join a biennial scramble for a fitting location in the sinking island city: *Secret Power* was split between the historic Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and Marco Polo Airport. Even more reason, some say, to forgo Venice for a smaller, perhaps edgier international art exhibition. Others argue

that this gives artists more freedom to respond to their immediate location.

On home turf, however, such responses are frequently met with vociferous resentment. Farrar says Denny addresses the important issues of privacy, mass surveillance and national identity, and his work "will provoke debate".

"We expect New Zealanders to have a view on how public money is spent and Te Papa welcomes that."

#### **CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE**

Chicago-based curator Mary Jane Jacob, who has been instrumental in the development of site-specific socially engaged art practices in the US, says such indignation can be seen as evidence of art's historic failure to connect with the community.

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*Cloud Gate* – popularly known as the Chicago Bean – by British artist Anish Kapoor, in the city's Millennium Park, has avoided that fate. "It could be a forgettable modern thing if it wasn't situated in a complex of a park with a number of other works of art and spaces that are about reclaiming public ownership," she says.

Jacob, who was in Auckland earlier this year for the International Award for Public Art (IAPA), says people will get used to a work or they'll simply stop talking about it – not a promising life journey for any work. "But a successful sculptural work will continue to be enriched by new readings of place and people. The question is, how does that work allow me to see my cultural heritage or appreciate someone else's?"

Sometimes it doesn't. Lewis Biggs, former director of Tate Liverpool and chairman of the Institute for Public Art,

established to support the biennial IAPA, pauses at a small trio of bronze corgis on a Christchurch intersection.

"The thing about public art in the street is you can't avoid seeing it. Often it is bad because the artist hasn't found a good aesthetic form for what they want to say. All art has to have form and content. It has to have content to be meaningful and it has to have form to do it."

Community-driven, grass-roots art may be loaded with meaning, he says, but



Symbol of home: Michael Parekowhai's *Lighthouse*.

without form "it won't communicate with anyone who wasn't involved in making it. So it's team art." At the other end of the scale are designs with nothing to say, ornamental objects with no content – motorway art, airport art. "It is rare to find work that has something important to say and has a way of saying it."

Not through lack of trying. In New Zealand, council policy statements highlight the importance of public art in "creating a sense of belonging and improving the look and feel of our public places" (Wellington), celebrating a region's creativity (Auckland) and making the city "an inspiring place to be" (Christchurch).

Investing in public art, says independent curator Rob Garrett, is money well spent. It attracts people, energy and businesses into inner cities and also expresses a city's current and historic diversity (those Queen Victoria statues can stay).

But in filling a council brief for public art, isn't there a risk of sacrificing informed, thoughtful commissioning processes to committee-driven urban renewal agendas and the civic stranglehold of compromise, timidity and arts orthodoxy? As US public art consultant Glenn Weiss wrote recently, commissioning permanent public art has always been a "crapshoot" in terms of long-term appreciation.

"All too often administrators point to a general location, hire craftsmanship and pray that a purposeful story emerges to link the work to the ongoing public imagination ... Like the administrative experimenters and artist questioners of the 1980s, we can find a way to free permanency from its civic aimlessness."

Some councils enlist outside expertise to advise on the who, what, how much and – hopefully – why of public art. Auckland's public art programme is supported by an external advisory panel. The Christchurch City Council commissions public work through its transitional city and capital works programmes and its public arts fund, managed by the Christchurch Art Gallery. Wellington City Council runs its own programme of public art projects and also works with the Wellington Sculpture Trust, which in 33 years has gifted \$8 million worth of public art to the city.

Key to the trust's evident success is its independence from local (or national) government. As Elliott says, councils can't ignore the naysayers: "We can weather a storm." The trust selects work in consultation with its own arts advisory panel consisting of senior curators, practising artists, an art teacher, an architect and an arts writer. "And when we write a brief we try to be as un-prescriptive as we can." But any work has to be right for its site. "It has to have substance, in the way it responds [to the site], in the thought that has gone into it. Its essence has to be true."

**"It's not art that makes a good city, it's the people, but art is a symptom of the health of a city."**

**AN EXPRESSION OF PEOPLE'S LIVES**

Public art, insists Biggs, should not be about creating jobs, luring tourists or putting vacant city space into use. It is not about buildings, "iconic or otherwise", and it is not about civic or commercial branding.

"When a developer wants to put a plaza on the map, they bring in a brand manager. It has an impact but it has an impact not allied to civic society. We are advocating a kind of art that is grounded in a political awareness, in the belief that society is a civic thing. [Public art] has to be an expression of something else, of people alive and questioning and interacting with each other and thinking about the lives they are leading.

"You start with the art and you get great art and of course it will create jobs. It's not art that makes a good city, it's the people, but art is a symptom of the health of a city so you have to put the conditions in place and then you will get great art and then you will have a great city." Art as activism? "Activism is trying to do something," he says. "Art is a comment, a cry."

*Talk to Me*, this year's IAPA winner, is a cry; an intimate yet radical proposal unfolding in a poorly lit stretch of road in Bangalore known for its history of sexual harassment. In 2012, volunteers with local arts project Blank Noise set up a row of tables and chairs. Throughout the day and into the early evening volunteers invited passers-by to engage in an hour-long conversation. No funding. No permits. No names. Just courage and, in the words of Blank Noise founder Jasmeen Patheja, "a purposeful unclenching of the fist".

"We wanted to address and arrest fear, to understand who we are afraid of and why. It was about initiating that conversation, having a place of exchange for people wanting to connect with this idea of trust and empathy."

Massey's Galbraith talks about an ecology of public art that includes the quick and the temporal as well as permanent works. The latter, she says, require more attention in terms of the social, historic and environmental context. "For more permanent public art-works, aesthetics has a much stronger role to play."

Inevitably they will be contested. "And I don't mind public debate," says Elliott. "If a work of ours didn't beg a question, I might think we've got it wrong." ■